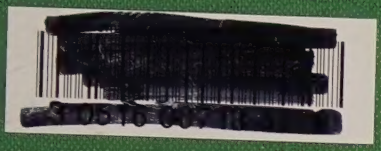

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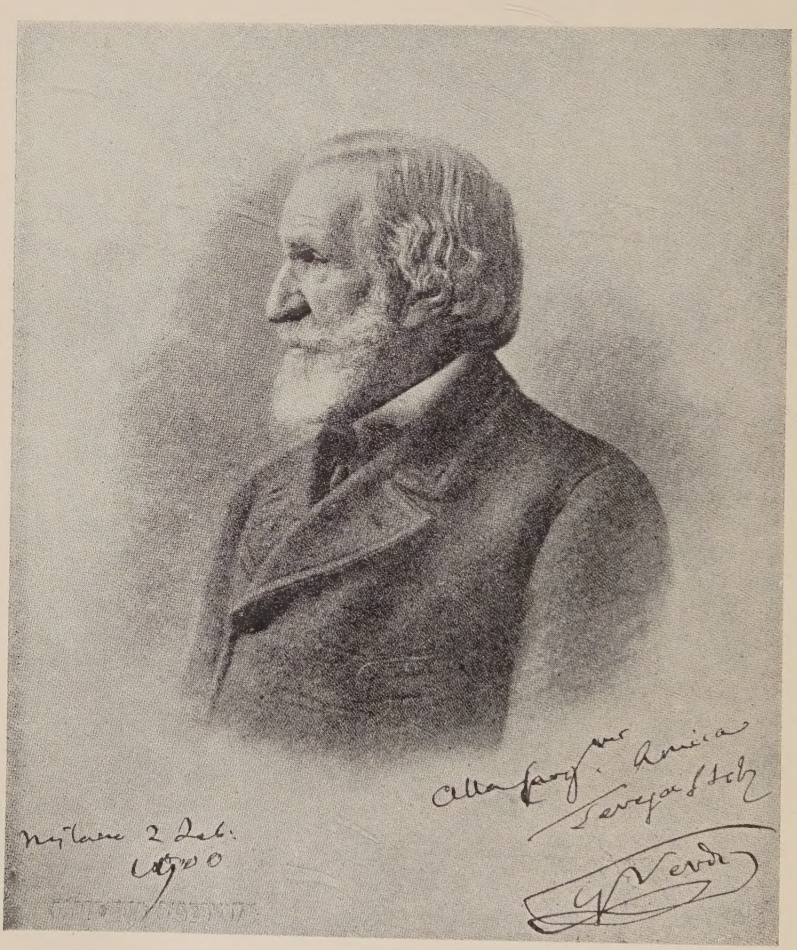

Giuseppe Verdi

FERRUCCIO BONAVIA

VERDI

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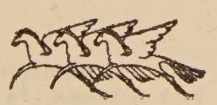
MCM  XLVII

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Preface

THE story of Verdi's life has been told by many biographers, by no one more ably or succinctly than by Bragagnolo and Bettazzi, whose volume contains all the essential facts. Since the publication of that work, however, a collection of letters has appeared, *I Copialettere di Giuseppe Verdi*, which, if it does not affect our estimate of the artist, throws considerable light on Verdi's character. From these "copies of letters" (which he kept for reference and not for publication), we can follow the working of his mind and gather his opinion of men and events. The portrait they reveal is complete to the last detail; and when we have read through the seven hundred pages of the *Copialettere*, we no longer wonder how it came about that so typical a man of the theatre as Verdi chose, while he was too young for a patriarch and too human for a philosopher, to pass the greater part of his life in the seclusion of the country, away from towns, with neither sea nor Alp to break the monotony of the landscape, seeking no one's favour or company. The letters reveal also the moral greatness of a man who was scrupulous in the observance of his duty, whose honesty was not bounded by conditions and circumstances, whose benefactions were known only to their recipients. Had Verdi not been a composer, he might have forfeited his claims to remembrance, but he would have still been a great man.

In the following pages I have tried to bring together Verdi as he reveals himself in the *Copialettere* and the circumstances of his life and time.

F.B.

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1

Early Years

THE greater part of Verdi's life falls within that period of history which is known as the Risorgimento and which resulted in the unification of Italy. When Verdi was born,[1] the peninsula was divided into small states owing allegiance to different rulers; when he was fifty-seven years of age Rome was proclaimed capital of the new kingdom, and the unity of Italy was an accomplished fact. That period has left a profound impression on Italian literature; no less, it influenced in various ways the art of music, which at one time was looked upon as an effective instrument of propaganda.

It might perhaps be imagined that Le Roncole, a little hamlet buried in the province of Parma, would have escaped the turmoil of war and politics, and have lived its unambitious life in ignorance of the deeds of armies and the quarrels of kings. An event, however, occurred there when Verdi was still a child which could not fail to bring home to that simple peasantry the realities of military conquest.

After the power of Napoleon had been broken at the Battle of Leipzig, Austrian and Russian troops were dispatched to Italy to overawe the inhabitants and uproot the French influence. Le Roncole could hardly have justified suspicion as a stronghold of French sympathizers; nevertheless a wandering troop of soldiers entered the village with all the panoply of war. At the approach of the soldiers the inhabitants fled in alarm; some to the fields, some to the church, which, they still trusted, the standard-bearers of the Holy Alliance must respect. They were mistaken. The soldiers forced their way into the church—which perhaps they mistook for a Temple of Reason—and murdered women and children indiscriminately. Amongst those who had sought refuge there was the composer's mother, Luigia Verdi, with her little child. More fortunate than the rest, they escaped massacre; for, instead of remaining in the body of the church, Luigia had hidden herself and the child in the belfry; and the soldiers, eager, no doubt to gather fresh laurels elsewhere, left that tower unexplored.

We may be sure that this example of wanton cruelty became a family story for the long winter evenings, and that the young Verdi went to bed his ears ringing with a tale of horrors more dreadful than any found in the plots of his operas. As the years came and went, there

[1] At Le Roncole, October 10, 1813.

were other tales—hardly less horrible—to feed the imagination of one who was at the most impressionable and receptive time of life. It would be hazardous to suggest that the story of the Neapolitan revolution published in 1800 found its way to Le Roncole, but it is reasonable to suppose that that typical example of Bourbon brutality was known and remembered.

In other ways too the political situation could not fail to influence adversely the development of a wide-awake, intelligent boy. The stagnation of life during a state of war or the preparation for war; the stunted growth of intellectual activity owing to the suspicions aroused in the minds of reactionary authorities by whatever savoured of progress and enlightenment; the lowering of the nation's vitality consequent upon its loss of liberty; the great difficulty put in the way of travel and intercourse between one centre and another; the determination of rulers to prevent the spread of knowledge which they feared might affect their prerogatives and feed disaffection—causes such as these could not but retard the natural development of his mind and imagination.

Le Roncole itself, with its population of agricultural labourers, offered little in the way of general education. No prince or prelate held court there, or encouraged artistic endeavour; its inhabitants tilled the soil, exchanged their products at the neighbouring town of Busseto, and bought necessities at the stores of Carlo Verdi—father of the composer. The immediate concerns of life were their interest; the church alone offered once a week the opportunity of forgetting for a moment material needs. And as the boy showed early signs of unusual alertness, he was enrolled as an assistant to the priest, who probably held out bright prospects of an ecclesiastical career as an inducement to learn by heart the responses of the Mass.

Young Verdi, however, soon betrayed other inclinations. Music affected him to such an extent that the sound of a street organ was enough to hold him spellbound. On the spinet he practised unaided, 'voyaging through strange seas of thought, alone'. Yet his abilities so impressed those who came to know him that a tuner, called in to repair some instrument the boy had mishandled, refused to accept payment for his work. Once, during a musical service in the church, a trick of the village organist so enraptured him that, completely forgetting his duty as an acolyte, he stood still, enthralled by the harmony. The officiating priest tried at first by gentle means to recall him to his senses, but when the child failed to attend to him he grew indignant and with an angry push sent him sprawling down the altar steps. Years later the same priest was struck by lightning; some saw in this a judgement from Heaven for the ill-treatment of young Verdi. When the boy reached home, bearing on his body the visible marks of his fall, he could only answer the anxious questions of his parents with the eager request to be allowed to study

music. He was utterly unaware of having failed in his duty. The violence of the priest was forgotten. All he remembered was the sound that had floated down from the organ. This incident made a stir in the village, and his parents granted a request urgently made in singular circumstances.

The village organist became Verdi's first instructor, progress was rapid, and at the age of twelve the pupil was thought sufficiently advanced to act at times as substitute for his master. It must not be supposed that Verdi was a 'wonder-child' like Mozart. His genius was not of the kind that is born full-fledged, but his technical knowledge, certainly far from remarkable, was enough to impress the small community in which he lived and the teacher saw and acknowledged a talent greater than his own. His parents, naturally willing to believe that their son promised to make his mark in the future, saw how necessary it was to send him to a sphere of greater knowledge and experience, where his talents could be fostered. Poverty and sentiment are serious but not unsurmountable obstacles where an only son's future is at stake, and so it was decided to send the boy a few miles away to Busseto, where Carlo Verdi traded and where a Philharmonic Society and a municipal brass band had established a certain local reputation. Thither the twelve-year old musician went to the house of a cobbler, who undertook to feed and lodge him for a few pence a day. Every weekday the boy attended school, practised music diligently, and sometimes acted as his father's agent and carrier. On Sundays he walked back to Le Roncole, where his services were required as organist for the celebration of High Mass.

Verdi was a lonely child, little given to sports, and taking no part in the pastimes of his schoolfellows—who doubtless looked askance at so grave and taciturn a companion. Italian boys develop at an early age; and it is certain that the prevailing thoughts of maturity were then waking into consciousness. His thoughts were chiefly of music; but years of loneliness and poverty at a time when most boys, with parents and teachers to protect them, begin to see a promise in the world, must have inclined him to melancholy and even pessimism. At Busseto perhaps he missed the freedom, the comparative ease and affection, of the homestead at Le Roncole, but the few hours he spent at home on Sunday must have been clouded over by the thoughts of duties awaiting him on his return. We know that he often went hungry. A child is impotent to satisfy his need; want undermines him morally and physically, and may even sear his mind. To these years of poverty can perhaps be ascribed the physical weakness which attacked him later; there is no doubt that to this is due the impatience he showed with those who failed to show gratitude for the opportunity of earning a reward for their labour. Verdi never knew what it was to be care-free, or to enjoy the relaxation of the schoolboy. It was impossible for him to share the cheerful optimism of the young who believe that if all is not well with the world, it will be

when they have reached manhood. A naturally thoughtful disposition inclined him to take life seriously. The circumstances of his upbringing made of an inclination a settled habit of mind. On the other hand, he had within himself a source of infinite pleasure in the love of music, in which he indulged whenever the municipal band of Busseto performed in public. Efforts have been made to prove that the Busseto band excelled in every way; but there is no real reason to suppose that either in choice of music or in performance it was above the average.

Two years passed in studies, in duties, in dreams. He was like an alien; not old enough for the society of grown men; too old in mind for companionship with his coevals, too young to appraise fairly the phenomena of life as they began to unfold themselves, yet not too young to feed his mind with phantoms.

Then there came a sudden change.

Prominent amongst the musicians of Busseto was a kindhearted, honest, prosperous merchant who from his wholesale warehouse supplied Carlo Verdi with the goods for his shop. Antonio Barezzi was an exceptionally keen lover of music. He presided over the Philharmonic Society, and lent his house for their meetings; he was a fair performer on the flute and understood most other wind instruments; on occasion he had been known to play the ophicleide in the town band. The 'signor Antonio' was something of a personage in the town; he had at heart the cause of music in Busseto and kept an eye open for local talent. On learning that the boy who now and then called at his stores to transact business was also a lover and a promising performer of music, he offered to take him into his service as a general apprentice, to serve customers, but also continue his studies in his spare time under the guidance of the best tutors Busseto could produce. The offer was accepted with enthusiasm. Barezzi gained a willing assistant who could also lend a hand in transcribing and arranging new music for the band and for the Society. To Verdi it meant the end of want, sympathy and an open door to ambition. A kindly priest, Canon Seletti, undertook to instruct him in the rudiments of Latin, and the organist of the cathedral, Francesco Provesi, had charge of his musical training. It was not long before both teachers discovered in their pupil unusual intelligence and alertness. The priest began to suggest an ecclesiastical career as the ultimate object of the boy's studies, while the organist held out promises of a brilliant future if he would devote himself to music. In the Barezzi household, by his serious, unassuming ways, young 'Beppino' won the affections of all; and his employer began to look upon him as one of his own children, encouraging him, rejoicing at his progress, appointing him lieutenant in the affairs of the Philharmonic Society, and giving him every opportunity to put his newly-won theoretical knowledge to the test of practice.

We can imagine the pleasure of the young musician when he first ran

his fingers over the keyboard of the grand piano specially purchased from Vienna by Barezzi; his anxiety too when the Philharmonic band consented to play through his first composition, his ineffable joy at hearing his own musical thoughts converted into sound, and his satisfaction when both his patron and the performers approved. He wrote marches and overtures for the band none of which has survived. Musically, no doubt, they had little value. But it would be interesting now to know exactly where Verdi began, and to follow his progress under Provesi's guidance. The rehearsals of the Philharmonic Society were undoubtedly of value. He learnt there how effects of colour are obtained, how different instruments can be combined, how a well-balanced distribution of parts contributes to the soundness of the texture of music, and how errors may be avoided. In Busseto there was also a little theatre, where now and then some unambitious play was given with music by his own teacher, the cathedral organist. It is impossible now to discover the subject of the operas; we may be sure they were neither daring in character nor novel in form. Yet these performances must surely have had a profound influence on Verdi, who saw for the first time how the stage, combined with music, can depict a world unreal and unconventional in some ways, yet much nearer than reality to our heart's desire.

Provesi was growing old. His lessons can have had little real interest for a boy of unusually quick intelligence; but there were compensations. If Provesi was too old and tired to take his place as conductor of the Philharmonic Society, a very eager substitute was always at hand in Verdi, who could thus gain all the practical experience Busseto had to offer. The other teacher, Canon Seletti, held for a while the firm belief that the church alone could offer a good opening to a poor but intelligent boy; but once, when he was about to celebrate High Mass, he was informed that the organist had not arrived, and that Verdi alone of those present was competent to take his place. After some demur, Seletti gave his consent; and when the celebration was over warmly congratulated the boy on his performance. On inquiring who the composer was of the music he had so much enjoyed, he learnt to his intense astonishment that Verdi's contribution had been a succession of improvisations. A good musician himself, Seletti realized the full significance of this fact, and never again urged his pupil to abandon music for the church.

The fame of these feats spread in Busseto. At the age of sixteen Verdi received his first official appointment as conductor of the town band—not, however, without opposition. When later the more important post of organist at one of the local churches became vacant, neither the influence of Barezzi nor the warm recommendation of Canon Seletti could secure it for Verdi. There were already in that little world of Busseto two factions, of which one was profoundly attached to Verdi, the other as profoundly hostile. Busseto, which had then probably not

more than a thousand inhabitants, was quite large enough to reproduce on a small scale the antagonisms, the vanities, and the jealousies of the great world.

Some of Verdi's biographers in their anxiety to give full credit to the town which first appreciated the composer's genius have described its artistic life in glowing colours. 'There flourished in Busseto', writes one of them, 'a school of some reputation, whence came the singers and the instrumental players who performed in the cathedral. . . . Music was the chief, if not the only, pastime of the town, the most frequent topic of discussion, an object of interest, the origin of competitions.' Another compares Verdi's living at Barezzi's house in Busseto with Haydn's serving an apprenticeship to Porpora in Vienna. This is more than fair to Busseto, but less than fair to Verdi. Busseto was no more a great centre of intellectual life like Vienna than Provesi was a celebrated teacher like Porpora. The tragedy of these few exquisitely happy years was that they provided very inadequate means for intellectual development. Barezzi and his friends gave Verdi all they had to give. Weighed in the scales of material comfort, of sentiment and affection, it was a great deal; but it was not what his genius needed most urgently. Educating the cathedral singers of a small town is not the same as educating a composer who means to make a bid for lasting fame. In the end, of course, genius must go its own way. Verdi alone could teach Verdi; but his genius might have reached maturity sooner had he had the advantages of early contact with men of wide knowledge and experience. As Berlioz proves, not the sharpest intellect nor the keenest enthusiasm can quite overcome the handicap of a late beginning. In two or three years Verdi had learnt all that Provesi could teach him: its inadequacy was seen when the young student on going to Milan to enter the Conservatorio failed in the entrance examination.

The methodical, stagnant life of Busseto had perhaps a more favourable effect on character. Contact with the peasantry of an agricultural country can teach the love of simple things and enforce the practice of simple virtues. A small community cut off from the great world must necessarily face elementary problems. When a poor or a rich harvest determines the poverty or the prosperity of all, where life is measured by the broad rhythm of the seasons, the necessity for patience, the value of courage and endurance are learnt more quickly and more thoroughly than in great cities. And Verdi came in time to love Busseto so well that when he became famous and wealthy, he bought the villa of Sant' Agata, within easy reach, preferring that 'desert' (as he called it) to the attractions of capitals.

Barezzi soon discovered, however, that Busseto could not provide adequate opportunities for Verdi's talent. It is also possible that he saw growing between his daughter, Margherita, and his very exceptional

apprentice a bond stronger than friendship. With the cordial approval of the tutors who nourished great hopes of their pupil, Barezzi decided to send him to Milan, then already famous amongst Italian cities for its musical institutions. He persuaded the trustees of a charitable institution to double the amount of the scholarship it was in their power to bestow, and added an allowance of his own. Thus provided, Verdi left Busseto, ready to begin his career by securing admission as a student to the Conservatorio.

His failure to pass the entrance examination is one of the commonplaces of musical history. There is not the slightest ground for ascribing that failure to the obtuseness of examiners unable to recognize genius when they saw it. On the contrary, the Milan examiners were careful to acknowledge the talent of the candidate, even going so far as to declare unanimously that they believed he would succeed brilliantly in his career ('riuscire con plauso') once he had mastered musical theory. Verdi was refused admission partly because of his errors in the pianoforte tests—an indictment not of Verdi's talent, but of the training he had received at Busseto—but chiefly because his age was considerably above the average. The Milan examiners said, in effect, that a boy of eighteen, to be suitable for admission to the college, must know more theory than old Provesi knew or could teach.

Verdi felt bitterly the blow to his pride. To make matters worse, the result of the examination was never notified to him directly, nor was he told beforehand that in view of his age more would be expected of him than of other candidates. He learnt of his failure accidentally from one of his examiners, who also strongly advised him to continue his studies with some responsible teacher not connected with the Conservatorio. Alone and labouring under a very natural feeling of resentment and humiliation, Verdi followed this advice and sought the help of Lavigna, a *répétiteur* at the Scala Theatre. Lavigna appears to have been an excellent teacher. He piloted his pupil through the mazes of musical grammar and syntax—harmony, counterpoint, fugue; made him examine closely the practical application of theory in the works of the great masters—Palestrina and Benedetto Marcello amongst the Italians, and amongst the Germans Bach, Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven—and than Verdi's real education may be said to have begun.

Two years were spent in making up for past deficiencies—years of solitary and constant study during which his friends of Busseto were certainly not forgotten. Like Wordsworth's Poor Susan, he must often have seen the noisy city disappear before his eyes and the sunny road leading from Busseto to Le Roncole take the place of the pavements of the Lombard capital. In token of remembrance he sent Cantatas, Romances, Caprices, and so on, to his faithful friends of the Busseto Philharmonic, which they, on their part, never failed to perform with

pride. Outwardly uneventful, but profitable years, in which, moreover, a little event occurred to salve the wound his *amour propre* had suffered from the rebuff at the Conservatorio.

One day the director of the Conservatorio, Basily, who had been one of Verdi's examiners, called at Lavigna's house, and in the course of the conversation lamented the fact that of twenty-eight candidates who had applied for a post then vacant not one had been able to work out correctly a fugal exercise which formed part of the examination. Lavigna immediately boasted that a pupil of his from Busseto would certainly succeed where the others had failed, and with Basily's permission, he called in Verdi and set him to work. In a short while the task was correctly accomplished, to the delight of Lavigna and no little astonishment of Basily, who no doubt recognized the unsuccessful applicant for admission to his Conservatorio. On another occasion, during the temporary absence of the conductor, Verdi was entrusted with the rehearsal of Haydn's *Creation* which the Milan Philharmonic Society was then preparing for a performance. He acquitted himself with so much credit that he was required to conduct the performance in the presence of the most notable personalities of the Lombard capital. The dilettanti began to take an interest in the young provincial. A wealthy nobleman, Count Renato Borromeo, commissioned him to write a cantata. The director of the Philharmonic urged the writing of an opera and sent him a libretto which Verdi accepted. After reading the text, however, his enthusiasm waned, for the poem was not at all to his liking. Fortunately, amongst his few friends a young poet of some talent, Temistocle Solera, came to the rescue, and revised the libretto in accordance with his wishes.

While Verdi was making a name of a sort in Milan, his old teacher, the organist Provesi died at Busseto. Barezzi and his friends now became anxious to have Verdi appointed as his successor and urged his immediate return. With brilliant prospects opening in Milan, it may seem singular that Verdi should have complied at once. But Busseto held something dearer to him than ambition in Barezzi's daughter, Margherita; and he hastened to accept the opportunity of returning to her. He came back having justified all but the most sanguine expectations. He had won the approval of his teachers and the interest of those who had it in their power to speed his progress; he had acquired confidence in himself and the comfortable knowledge that sooner or later the great world which can confer fame and wealth would listen to him.

Robert Louis Stevenson has said somewhere that those who have long been absent from their birthplace must never return if they would save themselves from grief more bitter than parting. Verdi had every reason to expect a warm welcome, and we may be sure that Barezzi spared no pains to make the reunion happy and memorable. Yet no sooner was he back amongst his friends than his opponents began to

exert themselves against the appointment. Barezzi's influence was again not strong enough to overcome the ecclesiastical authorities who were determined to exclude from the competition a pupil and friend of Provesi, a man they had disliked for his biting tongue. They appointed an organist of their own choice, whose name is unknown to history, but who became the cause of bitter conflict between town and cathedral.

To Barezzi and his following the appointment was not only an injustice but an affront. They could not meddle with the decisions of the cathedral clergy, contrary to the wishes of the whole community, but they could do something to make them rue it. The municipality began by withdrawing the subsidy they contributed towards the salary of the organist and giving it to Verdi, along with the title of 'Master of Music to the Commune of Busseto'. The ecclesiastics were then forced to make good the loss of the organist's emoluments out of their own funds. A heavier blow was struck when Barezzi persuaded the Franciscan Friars to allow Verdi to direct the choral services of their church. The copious compositions he provided and the excellence of the performances drew large congregations, while the cathedral services were held before empty benches.

There is something ludicrous about this rivalry between the future composer of *Otello* and the unknown organist of Busseto. It is certainly no credit to the lion to have conquered the rabbit. In development, opportunity, acquisition of knowledge and experience, these years at Busseto meant sheer waste of time. Yet no one will grudge Verdi the inglorious victories of these years, the happiest of his life. Had he but known them, he might well have quoted the words of Othello which drew from him music of exquisite tenderness:

> My soul hath her content so absolute
> That not another comfort like to this
> Succeeds in unknown fate.

His time was fully occupied. The libretto of the opera had been revised, and its composition engaged every moment he could spare from manifold duties. The band he conducted had become famous in the district and was often invited to perform in neighbouring towns. The Philharmonic Society made use of him in every capacity—conductor, composer, solo pianist. He wrote new music for the Society, for the band, for the services of the Franciscans. To crown his happiness, Barezzi gave him his daughter in marriage, the wedding taking place on May 4, 1836.

The opera was finished a year later. An attempt to secure a performance at Parma in the autumn of 1837 was unsuccessful; and once more it became evident that only the capital of Lombardy could give him the opportunities he needed. Early in 1839 Verdi left Busseto for Milan, taking with him his young wife and two children, a boy and a girl.

2

Milan

MILAN was then, as now, the most important musical centre in Italy. The theatre of La Scala represented the Italian art of the theatre at its best, and its public was credited with a flair for good things. In Milan was transacted most of the theatrical business of the peninsula, and nowhere else was to be found such a concourse of singers, choristers, conductors, dancers, prompters, all seeking the offices of agents to introduce them to impresarios in search of musicians. The impresario was often a musician himself and always a speculator. When a season ended in triumph, he netted a small fortune; when it ended in disaster he disappeared, leaving the unfortunate members of the company to return home as best they could.

The most important theatres—the Scala of Milan, the San Carlo of Naples, and a few others—received a small 'dowry' contributed by the municipality, as well as the patronage of noblemen who enjoyed the right to occupy the same box year after year. The patrons kept an eye on the doings of the impresario, insisted on the engagement of singers with an established reputation, and generally sought guarantees of efficiency and responsibility. At best the system was weak; at worst, vicious. So long as the prejudice of some ignorant but powerful patron could take precedence of artistic considerations, so long as the impresario ran the risk of seeing his earnings and savings disappear through momentary loss of public favour, the door was open wide to abuse. The singer whose name could mesmerize the public naturally commanded a high fee, but his vanity grew with his popularity. He began to dictate to the impresario and to the conductor; he ended by dictating to the composer. It was no uncommon thing for a singer to stipulate that a certain number of arias should be specially written in any opera in which he was to take part, regardless of the development of the plot and of dramatic requirements. Where there was no endowment and no patron the conditions of musicians resembled those of the old mummers, who went from one country fair to another, never sure that their labours were not to end in fasting.

These impossible conditions were accepted without demur by Verdi's contemporaries and by the unheroic but magnificent man who in range of talent came nearest to him—Rossini, nicknamed 'Jove'. Undoubtedly in his lifetime Rossini enjoyed a reputation greater than that to which he was entitled; and since then has paid a penalty greater than his sins. As

Rossini was at that time the pattern on which, so it was foolishly thought, all Italian composers should model themselves, it is worth while to push our inquiries farther into the character of the musician whose achievements dazzled Europe. The man who could write the most sparkling comic opera of his day—*The Barber of Seville*, and also, complying with the tastes and requirements of Paris, produce a masterpiece like *William Tell* can only be described as a great composer. The fertility of his talent, the ingenuity, resource, and skill shown in these works deserve no less. Yet to-day, apart from *The Barber of Seville*, his operas are almost completely forgotten. What Nemesis has overtaken this exceedingly wise man, whose common sense could assuage the enraged Wagner, whose sallies delighted the wits of Paris, whose generosity was shocked by the spectacle of Beethoven at work in a cheerless room without a friend and without elementary comforts! If Rossini's operas are forgotten while Beethoven's and Verdi's are remembered, it is because he deliberately chose to write for the moment while they worked for all time. Gifted with a facility which has had few parallels, Rossini never questioned the taste, the customs, the traditions of his day, whereas Beethoven ignored them, Wagner rebelled against them, and Verdi, by example and precept slowly but continuously worked to reform them. Rossini did not care if the arrogance of singers forced composers to surrender their birthright. When they demanded trills and roulades he took care that they should have them. If the form became fragile and precious the fault was not his but that of his times; if music-drama degenerated into an academic display, if the stage became peopled with personages who resembled men and women no more than a mannequin, if the heroes of the classical age retained nothing more heroic than the costume, he was too much of a philosopher to dispute the right of the period to model these things in accordance with its taste. And now the penalty for weak complaisance has to be paid. Not only does the critic find that Rossini's creatures suffer in comparison with those who, like Aïda and Brünnhilde, are clothed in our own humanity, but the very race of singers whose whims and caprices he satisfied, whose vanity he tolerated, whose popularity he fostered, have failed him with the coming of the new era. There are to-day few who can sing and fewer who can understand this music. His age has gone, and with it something that was an essential part of his title to fame.

When Verdi first came to Milan his admiration for Rossini was boundless—nor could it have been otherwise. To the youth from Busseto Rossini's meteoric career must have seemed something of a marvel—the Pesarese was to him indeed 'Jove', the all-conquering, all-powerful; and, if ambition urged him to go as far and farther, he was too modest to own it even to himself. But for all his shyness Verdi had even then qualities which were wanting in Rossini—quiet but unshakable determination, a stern sense of duty, a conception of life based on the axiom that to labour

is the lot of man; a deep attachment to justice, balanced by an equally deep repugnance for oppression, intrigue, brutality—qualities that are at the root of character. Verdi was a man who had at least profound faith in his art; the other, a confirmed and acknowledged sceptic, was misunderstood even when he performed a civic duty or an act of patriotism. Rossini gave money and two of his four horses to the patriots of Bologna; yet all the thanks he got for this gift was a hostile demonstration. It was rank ingratitude, but justified to some extent by the inability of the crowd to believe him capable of an act at once generous and fraught with personal danger.

Verdi, as bandmaster of Busseto, had won considerable success by his interpretation of the overture to *William Tell*. When the two composers actually met in Paris years later, Rossini had already retired from an active career. They came to know each other well. Verdi's admiration became discriminating, and the time came when, repenting perhaps his early uncritical enthusiasm, he declared that 'trills and roulades do not make a melody'. Rossini showed less insight into character when he described Verdi as a serious young man who would never write a comic opera.

The contrast between them is reflected in their work. *The Barber of Seville* and *Falstaff* have subjects which appealed to the instinctive sympathies of the composers, subjects which could stimulate, urge, and inspire them. Rossini is attracted by Beaumarchais', Verdi by Shakespeare's comedy. In the last every character has foibles but is lovable; in Beaumarchais all the characters invite ridicule—the old amorous, tyrannical guardian doomed to be fooled by the quicker wits of the younger generation; the pert ward, unamiable, with more than a promise of the future shrew; the needy rogue Basilio, a typical scandal-monger; Almaviva, the most conventional of stage lovers; Figaro quick and resourceful but ready to sell himself to the highest bidder. We laugh at their tricks, we enjoy the exquisite drawing of the caricature, but we have no affection for them. For all its wit, vivacity and exquisite touches, the Rossinian comedy is musically conventional. There is not a trace of conventionality in Verdi's *Falstaff*.

In spite of the decay of the Italian theatre (which Rossini deplored but did not try to arrest) opera undoubtedly enjoyed great popularity. The theatre, so dear to the Italian, was equally a forum for artistic demonstrations and a meeting-place. A gala performance, with, possibly, a cantata written for the occasion, was often the climax of great national events, and sometimes, at this particular period of Italian history, political allusions, open, veiled, or simply imagined, could turn an artistic performance into a rousing patriotic demonstration. The scene described in Meredith's *Vittoria* is typical of many enacted in a hundred Italian theatres.

If the popularity of the genre was an incentive, the custom of including a new work in all important seasons gave the unknown composer his opportunity. The practice often resulted in disappointment. Many operas failed at the first attempt, others had a brief period of notoriety; the immense majority have completely disappeared. But the system served to smooth Verdi's path.

Deplorable as the plan was which allowed dramatic action to be cut into a series of arias for the display of virtuosity, the audience of the day expected nothing else. It was an age of virtuosos, of *improvisateurs* and infant prodigies, remnants of eighteenth-century academicism and artificiality. The amateur who applauded the virtuosity of violinist and pianist in the concert room expected neither more nor less from the singer in the opera house. He took it as a matter of course that a celebrated soprano or tenor should be given opportunities commensurate with his abilities. A revelation of skill and of natural gifts was one of the chief attractions of all musical performances; and opera had the additional advantage of pleasing the eye with its costumes and scenery. But the thought that a composer could ever vie with poets in psychological truth and power never dawned upon the public of the time. Often the subjects chosen were as remote from life as possible. Cato, Themistocles, Semiramis, were favourite themes which attracted many of Verdi's predecessors. In Italy alone fifty operas were written at one time or another on the subject of Artaxerxes; and the only reason that can be suggested for this popularity of a barbaric hero is the opportunity for splendid, exotic costumes. The theatre was academic because it followed in the wake of the literary academies which the preceding century had spread like a blight over Italy, encouraged by those whose interest it was to distract attention from politics, who hoped to stamp out ideas of liberty and independence sown by the French Revolution.

The influence of politics on Verdi's life and art cannot be denied. He himself played an honourable part in the movement which resulted in the unity of Italy; in his choice of plots he was frequently hampered by censors who suspected revolutionary sentiments; he wrote songs which sounded to the Italians like battle hymns; he was urged to use his art as an instrument for spreading national ideas. If it is said that the quality of a composer's work cannot be affected by the fortunes of war or by the chance which puts one man rather than another on the throne, we answer that mood and temperament are affected not by one fact but by general atmosphere—and mood and temperament have an unquestionable influence on artistic output. Verdi wrote songs that seemed to plead with impassioned eloquence for a political cause, not because he deliberately chose to do so, but because his gifts were such as to appeal to the masses and rouse them to enthusiasm. But that he desired to do so is certain. We may be unable to gauge with any pretence of accuracy how

politics influenced music (for music evades such questions): but we can measure with some exactness the influence politics had on poetry of which Verdi was a constant student, and nowhere more clearly than on Italian romanticism with its peculiar characteristics. The phenomenon known under the broad name of romanticism acquired a different characteristic in accordance with the national idiosyncrasies of the countries in which it appeared. But while English, French, and German romanticism have certain points in common, Italian romanticism remained somewhat outside this orbit. Of the many definitions of romanticism suggested not one applies to the Italian movement. It cannot be defined as 'the light that never was on sea or land', nor is it inspired by 'the glory of lake and mountains, grace of childhood, dignity of the untaught peasant'. It cannot be identified with 'the renascence of wonder' nor with the aphorism that 'poetry is philosophy and philosophy poetry'.

The reason for this detachment is clear; Italy was preparing to fight a long and difficult battle for freedom, and Italian romanticism became imbued with political thought. In Germany a patriotic play like Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell* was considered consistent with romantic ideals; in Italy the most important patriotic play was written by a classicist. The leader of the Italian Romantics was Manzoni, and Manzoni was the standard-bearer of the clerical party.

Like poetry, philosophy was deeply imbued with national ideals. Mazzini in tracing the philosophy of music saw the musician of the new era as a Taillefer leading the van with his song. He insisted on the necessity that art should appeal to all, reach the heart of the multitude, and rouse it like a tocsin of war. That was, according to him, the first duty of the musician in the ideal republic which he would have established. Yet more explicit and practical was the poet Giusti, who wrote to Verdi urging him to express in music the feelings of the nation: 'the grief that now weighs on the Italians is the grief of men who, having fallen, mean to rise again, it is the grief of penitents awaiting redemption. Let your noble harmonies be the burden of this great sorrow—give it sustenance and strength, help it towards the goal. Music is the speech of all men; no feeling however profound is beyond the power of music to express.'

Others there were who, impressed by the necessity of a closer intellectual unity between provinces that had long been estranged, urged simplicity, and the avoidance of whatever savoured of far-fetched or elaborate artistry. 'National speech will be a living language when it has been freed from expressions the people do not understand. A popular art may fall into the commonplace, but our old traditions will raise it to its pristine dignity. Art must represent reality and fancy as the people conceive them—no longer the lyrical forms of the court, but the songs of the people.'

It is highly probable that Verdi never saw this passage from Settem-

brini; but the thoughts it expresses were in the air and applied perfectly to his art.

When Verdi arrived in Milan, carrying in his bag the score of his first opera *Conte Oberto di San Bonifacio*, he had no intention of becoming the Tyrtaeus of his time. But he could not live there long without learning that the thoughts of the best of his countrymen were turned to something that was not opera. The time was still distant when the Milanese were to rise in revolt and expel an Austrian army from the city. But the antagonism between oppressed and oppressors was patent; as time went by it became more and more active. The Austrian politicians affected to believe that the Italian provinces were willing partners of the Empire; the Austrian soldiers were under no such illusion: and as Verdi met them swaggering in their white uniforms, he could not but realize how the population was held in subjection by an army of occupation, and how armed conflict was bound to break out sooner or later.

When the moment came he gave his aid to the cause of national liberty, without stint. He held aloof from parties, which, as he probably saw, tended at such a moment to weaken the national effort. He accepted the monarchy although the republicanism of Mazzini must have had some attractions for his idealistic nature. He was out of sympathy with the clerical party who would have made Italy into a Papal State; yet at least one of his dearest friends, the translator of Shakespeare, Carcano, was an ardent Catholic; and Verdi admired no man more sincerely, deeply, and reverently than Alessandro Manzoni, the leader of the Romantic and Catholic movement.

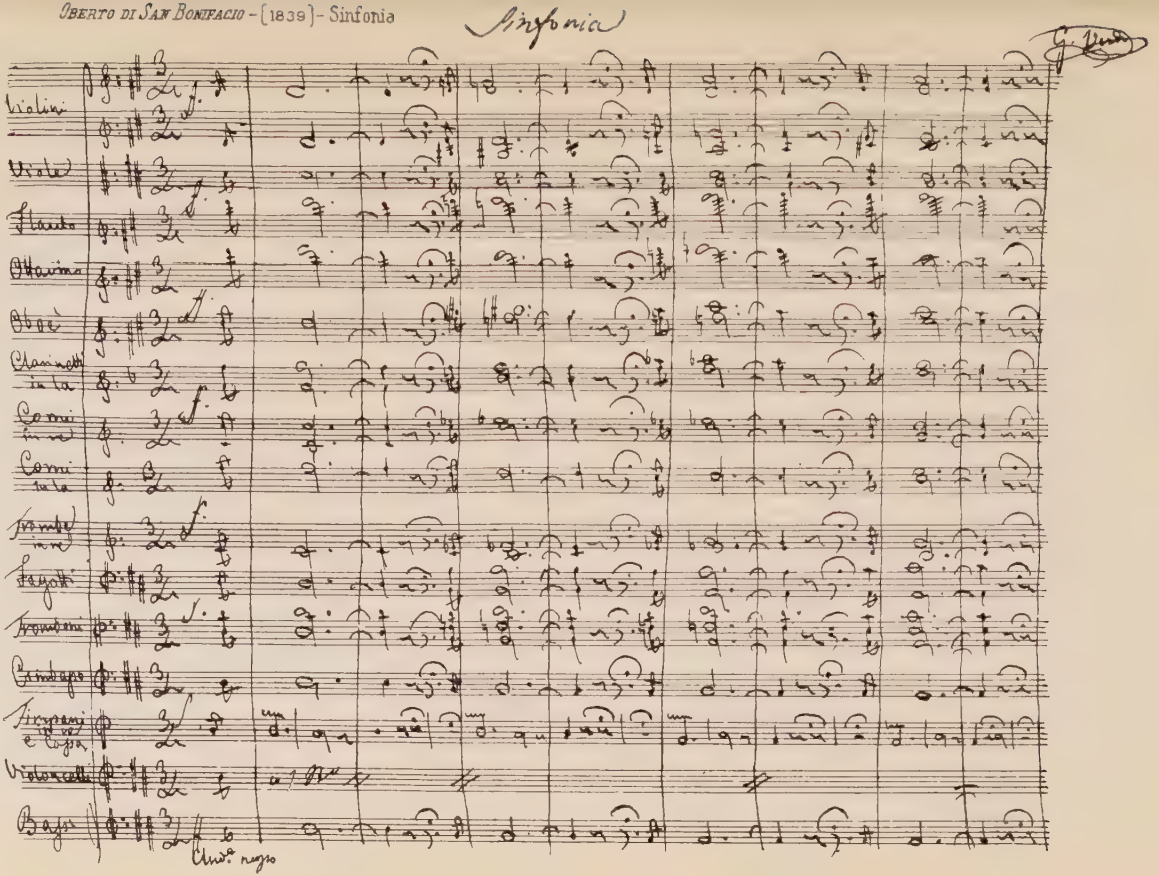
To conclude a brief survey of the times it should be said that the armed truce which began with the death of Napoleon and ended with the first outbreak of the revolutionary movement in 1848 was not in Italy a time when artistic considerations could assume great importance. The first need of a country held in subjection is to rid herself of the enemy, and to that end all effort and all energy inevitably tends. As Verdi proved, music can be an art of war as well as of peace. But as an instrument of war, it must inevitably resign some of its divine attributes. For the musician obsessed by a purpose which is not solely, or even principally, artistic is no longer able to develop his genius untrammelled.

By temperament and upbringing Verdi was conservative, slow to accept reforms, shy of new theories. If, however, the reform he was destined to bring about in Italian opera was slow in its evolution, it must be admitted that causes other than innate distrust of rapid changes conspired to delay it—not least a political situation in which the claims of the state were urgent and irresistible.

3

From 'Oberto' to 'Ernani'

THERE are musicians who believe that opera as an art form is unnatural. So it is. But many of the objections which can be urged against opera apply also to other forms. The nineteenth century—perhaps on account of frequent war and revolutions—seemed only too glad to accept what its artists provided without looking too closely into the 'naturalness' of their creations. Verdi at any rate had no such scruples. He was following the example of his predecessors and contemporaries. His instinct was for the theatre; to deny it would have been as 'unnatural' as to deny the instinct of life. The love of fiction is founded on a desire to escape from reality. No matter whether the means are those of the novelist, the dramatist, or the composer of opera, in some form or other we all indulge it.

At Milan Verdi took the earliest opportunity of calling on his friend Masini, the director of the Philharmonic Society, to ask his help in producing *Oberto*. But Masini's influence had declined somewhat while Verdi was at Busseto, and considerable time had to pass before arrangements could be made. After an anxious period the opera was accepted at the Scala; not as part of the regular repertory, but for one of the performances given towards the end of the season in aid of local charities. Rehearsals began with the singers, one of whom was Giuseppina Strepponi, who later became Verdi's second wife; and there was reason to hope for an early performance when the principal tenor fell ill and the whole project collapsed. Despairing of ever seeing the opera on the stage, Verdi was contemplating an early return to his humble occupations at Busseto when he was brought into contact with a man of rare acumen—the impresario of the Scala, Bartolomeo Merelli. Some of the singers who had rehearsed the music of *Oberto* had given a very favourable account of the new work to Merelli and he, trusting their judgement made Verdi an offer that was, in the circumstances, very generous. He would undertake to give the opera at the Scala during the coming season, assuming all the responsibilities and expense of the production, on condition that Verdi paid him one-half of any amount he might receive from a publisher in the event of the opera being sold after a successful performance. Verdi of course accepted at once and, giving up all thought of returning to Busseto, set about the work of preparation for the coming test.

Reproduction of Verdi's Scoring of the first page of his first opera

Oberto, Conte di San Bonifacio was produced on November 17, 1839. It was so well received that before long performances were given in all the important Italian theatres. Giovanni Ricordi, who, beginning life as a copyist and prompter, had become the most important publisher of music in Italy, bought the rights for 2,000 Austrian lire (about £70) a sum which was shared according to the contract between the composer and the impresario, who had reason to be satisfied with their first common venture.

Oberto, Conte di San Bonifacio has long ago disappeared from the stage. There is no doubt that it impressed those who heard it very favourably, otherwise so shrewd a publisher as Ricordi would never have bought it. It is reported that someone in the audience said after the performance: 'We now have the man we have long awaited—the Messiah.' This triumphant prophecy is re-echoed by a later critic, Soffredini, who finds it 'the outcome of profound studies and the manifestation of genius'. Humbler critics with no gift of prophecy, who cannot deduce *The Kingdom* from *King Olaf*, *Parsifal* from *Die Feen*, or *Otello* from *Oberto*, must frankly admit their inability to endorse this verdict. It is not that one misses the likeness between the turn of certain phrases in *Oberto* and other phrases found in later Verdian operas, or the promise of certain features of the music; but a critic can never be sure of the direction the composer will take. The name is legion of the artists who begin by roaring like lions and end chattering like poor Poll. Soffredini maintains that without *Oberto* there would have been no *Nabucco* and that without *Nabucco* there would have been no subsequent series of successful operas. I believe that with or without *Oberto* (or even *Nabucco*) Verdi's genius was bound to assert itself sooner or later. It matters little—except as history—when and where a beginning was made. The end was bound to be *Otello* and *Falstaff*. The growth of a man's mind does not depend on the goodwill of impresarios or the caprice of the public.

Oberto exhibits some typical Verdian traits. From this seed more than one future flower was to spring, and there are pages with the rude strength and with the suavity which stand at the extreme poles of Verdi's early work. But the strength tends to violence and the serenity is as yet too young and artless to reflect character. The plan of the opera is poor —two long acts—and there is little trace of 'profound studies'. A certain skill there is, but the object of profound studies is to educate taste, which in *Oberto* is frequently at fault. Even Soffredini finds the choral parts commonplace. The most remarkable thing about *Oberto* is the absence of outside influences. The individuality of the composer, if somewhat awkward, is unmistakable. This is perhaps what impressed the Milanese public and also Merelli, who immediately asked Verdi to write three more operas—one on a comic and two on serious subjects—offering a fee of 4,000 Austrian lire for each.

Verdi, all aglow with his first success, accepted, and set to work on a text by Rossi entitled *Il Proscritto*; he had not gone far, however, when Merelli sent him word that he wanted the comic opera first, and the choice fell on a text which had already been unsuccessfully set to music by Gyrowetz under the name *Il Finto Stanislao*. The title was changed to *Un Giorno di Regno* and Verdi began the score of the opera which ended in immediate and irretrievable failure.

It was an ill-starred venture from the first. No sooner had he set to work than he suffered a severe attack of angina. While still convalescent he found that the illness had exhausted his little stock of money. The rent was due and there was no way of meeting the debt. It was a trifling matter. A letter to Barezzi would have settled everything. But the post for Busseto left Milan only twice a week, and it would have been unwise to reckon on getting an answer in less than ten days. Verdi's pride was hurt; for all the success of *Oberto*, for all the applause of the public, he had not enough money to keep his family from want. Punctilious in the discharge of all debts, moral and material, Verdi found the very thought of debt galling. Convalescence is the state in which trifling worries are magnified out of all proportion and, a prey to deep anxiety, he turned in his need to Merelli, asking for an advance or a loan. But Merelli never received Verdi's message. Verdi understood his silence to mean a refusal and saw his last hope gone. He was in despair when his wife saved the situation; she collected the few trinkets she possessed, pawned them, and came back with the money for the landlord.

To this humiliating experience was soon added deeper cause for sorrow. His younger child, a boy, fell ill suddenly and died before the physician could diagnose the disease. A few days later the daughter succumbed to the same mysterious malady. Only two months after this double loss his wife, Margherita Barezzi, also fell ill and died, leaving Verdi alone, a stranger amongst strangers. There were no doubt kind people in Milan who did what could be done to soften his sorrow. But the town held now too many tragic memories; Verdi's thoughts must have turned with desperate longing to Busseto, recalling bitter-sweet memories of the house where he had known the first yearning of love, the first hope, the first joys of composition, the first pride of success.

He was bound by the terms of his contract to write a comic opera and, true to his word, he did it. *Un Giorno di Regno* was put on the stage at the Scala on September 9, 1840, a bare three months after Margherita Barezzi's death. It was a complete failure. Later, the performances given in Venice and Naples only confirmed the verdict of the Milanese. It was severely judged by the critics at the time and has found no defender since—except the ever-faithful Soffredini. There is no reason to doubt that the performance was inadequate—probably because the composer himself undertook the preparation with little care for its success. But

the public rebuff added another weight to his misery and he went to Merelli to ask to be released from his contract. Merelli treated him at first like a naughty schoolboy, but seeing him determined to have his way, consented, adding that if at any time Verdi changed his mind, any opera of his would be accepted.

How deeply he was wounded by the failure may be gathered from the following letter he wrote many years later to Tito Ricordi after the failure of *Simon Boccanegra*, caused, it is said, by the incapacity of the chief interpreter:

'The fiasco of *Boccanegra* at Milan was foreordained—*Boccanegra* without Boccanegra! Cut off a man's head and then see if you can identify him. You are surprised by the discourtesy of the public—I am not. The public is always happy when there is a scandal. When I was 25 I had my illusions and among them a belief in its good nature. A year later my eyes were opened; I saw with whom I had to deal. Some people make me smile when they upbraid me and say I ought to be grateful to the public of this or that theatre. It is true that the public of the Scala applauded *Nabucco* and *I Lombardi* . . . only a year before the same public had treated very badly the work of a young man who was ill and desperate, and they knew it, but it put no check on their discourtesy. I have not seen *Un Giorno di Regno* again from that day to this, and I daresay it is a bad opera; yet who knows how many that are no better have been tolerated and even applauded? If the public then had, I will not say applauded, but just received the work in silence I should not have had words enough to express my thanks. Since then they have applauded operas that have also been applauded elsewhere; the slate is clean. I do not mean to criticize the public. But I accept severity and hisses only on condition that I am not asked to be grateful for applause.'

He determined to write no more music. Grieved and wounded, he found the sun slow in setting and the dawn long in coming. He left Milan for Busseto where at least were those who could share his grief, where Margherita had lived, where his children had been born. It was the obvious step to take—and yet a mistake, as he soon found out. His loss was too recent for him to stand the shock of memories revived by the sight of those places. To forget the past was impossible amid surroundings which added to his sorrow. Milan could at least offer the distraction of a busy world: so, saying good-bye to Barezzi, he returned there, still determined not to write music, but hoping to earn a living as a coach for singers. He took rooms in the Corsia dei Servi and settled down to a life of routine, passing the time in gossip with other musicians in the neighbourhood of the Scala or in the rooms of impresarios and publishers.

One snowy night Verdi met Merelli, who, very glad to see him again, insisted on his coming to the theatre where he had his office. On the way he told Verdi that Nicolai had refused an excellent libretto by Solera

which he himself had been instrumental in obtaining. Verdi then suggested that the libretto *Il Proscritto*, written for himself, should be offered to Nicolai instead. Merelli approved the suggestion, but as soon as he entered the office he began to look for the rejected text. 'Take this', he said, 'and tell me what you think of it.' Verdi took the manuscript and went home.

Alone in his room he glanced at it, recalling no doubt his own hopes, and his eye caught a line which appealed to him. He was still determined not to write a single note. But the creative instinct had been aroused. He passed a sleepless night reading and re-reading the libretto. On the morrow he went back to Merelli to return it. It was admirable, he said, but he had no intention of composing. Merelli, either seeing that the resolve was not as firm as it had been or determined to rescue Verdi from his apathy, told him brusquely to keep the libretto, to write the music, and never to show himself until he had done it. Verdi took his dismissal in good part, having guessed the kindly purpose of Merelli's rudeness. He went home and began to write. Not many days later he was back at Merelli's office to discuss the production. Thus was born *Nabucco*, the first opera which brought him something more than local fame.

A phrase in a letter written to Barezzi a short while before the Merelli incident further explains the change of heart. Verdi was tired of inaction. However dispirited and indifferent, he still desired to count for something, 'not to be useless'. Domestic tragedy could reduce him to apathy, but not reconcile him to idleness; he hated to contemplate writing music, but he was eager to turn his hand to useful work. The libretto of *Nabucco* recalled him to a realization of the fact that he was born a composer. That was his mission; in that alone lay hope of forgetfulness and relief from the burden that weighed him down.

An understanding with Merelli was easily reached. The cast chosen by Verdi was the best the Scala Company could offer, and included Giuseppina Strepponi. Rehearsals began in February and on March 9, 1842, *Nabucco* was produced. Less than two years after the fall of *Un Giorno di Regno* Verdi tasted for the first time the joy of a real triumph. It is reported that on the first night the audience was so stirred that the whole house rose at the end of each act with great acclamations. The critics made some reservations, but on the whole their verdict was favourable. Donizetti was full of praise for the young musician. The publisher Ricordi bought the opera for 3,000 lire (he had paid 2,000 for *Oberto*), and Merelli, although according to the contract entitled to one-half of that sum, refused to take more than 500 lire. *Nabucco* triumphed in every Italian theatre, and its composer found himself suddenly famous and, if not wealthy, considerably better off than he had ever been. A contract was made there and then for another opera for which Verdi,

advised by Giuseppina Strepponi, asked 8,000 lire—the sum which had been paid to Bellini for *Norma*.

Some of the music of *Nabucco* still lives. The overture, at least, may be heard in Italy performed by brass bands and the melody of the chorus 'Va Pensiero sull' ali dorate' is known to every Italian. The opera itself has disappeared from the repertory. It is not difficult to understand its success in Italy (abroad it did not meet with the same recognition) for the Italians found in it much that they cherished—abundance of easy, but warm and sincerely-felt melody, at times sweet, at times rising to passionate intensity; vitality and novelty, especially in the important share assigned to the chorus.

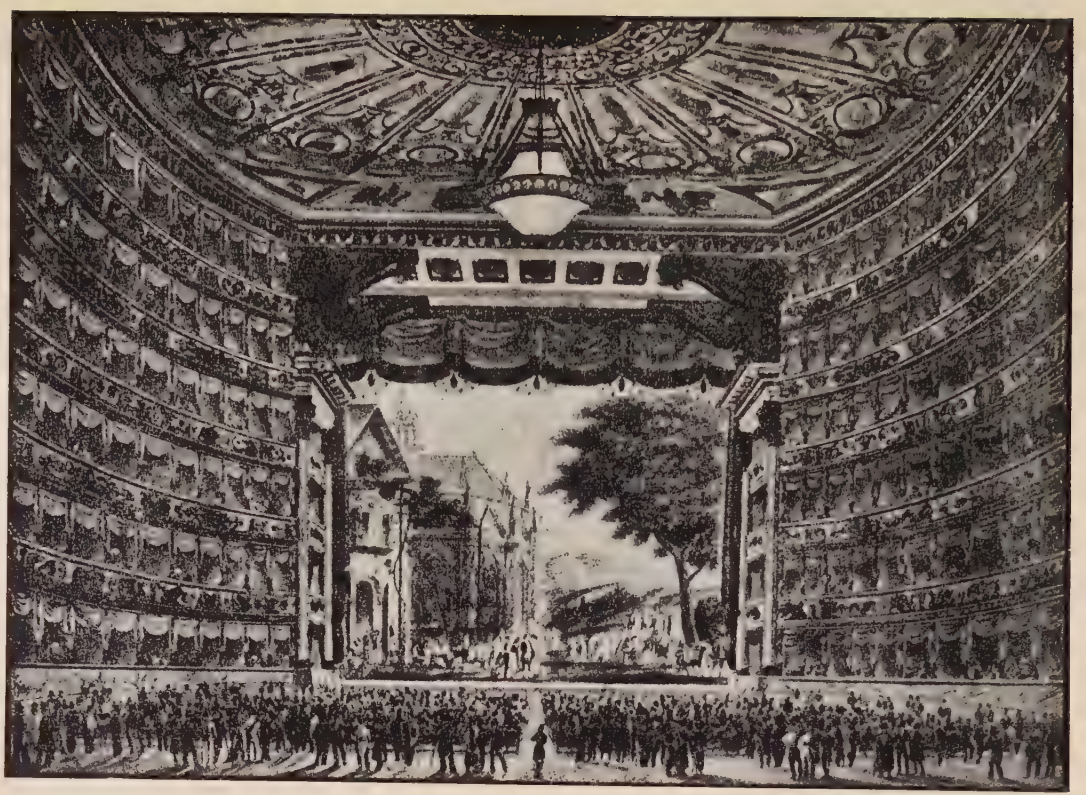
What to a foreign critic seemed 'the frantic and ungracious part of the heroine' may well strike the livelier southern temperament as energy and movement. In England there was certainly prejudice against the Biblical subject, and Henry Chorley probably expressed a common feeling when he wrote: 'We English are not so hard, or so soft, as to be willing to see the personages of Holy Writ acted and sung in the theatres. Hagar in the Wilderness, Ruth gleaning among the "alien corn", Herodias with the head of John the Baptist in the charger, are subjects of personal exhibition which all thoughtful lovers of art in music must regret, on every principle of reverence and of taste.' What would Chorley have said had he seen the head of John the Baptist carried on a salver in *Salomé*?

There is more serious reason for adverse criticism in the conventional cast of the harmonies, in the obviously popular cut of the melodies. The accompaniment often lacks distinction, the harmonic design variety and originality; the melody itself, always fluent and expressive, has a squareness, a directness and simplicity to which sophisticated tastes may well demur. Such strictures lose in great part their force if we are prepared to admit that it is the purpose of art to find the heart of the masses. That was the art of which Verdi was master in *Aïda* no less than *Nabucco;* and the fertility of his mind, the simplicity of the means employed, and the wealth of luscious melody he poured forth in these operas are amazing. From *Nabucco* onwards the evidence of genius is clear and undeniable. But the advance shown by his later works indicates that Verdi himself was not satisfied with his first ventures; and if we do not extend to *Nabucco* a more enthusiastic welcome, it is that we would not imitate Soffredini who, after finding in it 'the mysterious prodigality of genius which casts about its treasures without being aware of it', expresses later the belief that *Falstaff* marks the decline of the composer's genius, and even hints that the permission to perform it in public was extorted from Verdi by too eager friends. Such criticism reveals the bias and limitations of a writer who demands of music that 'it should set the people singing'. That, he says, is the standard by which greatness in a composer

must be measured and whatever does not conform to it is, for him, worthless. He admits Verdi's greatness but bases the claim on *Nabucco* and *I Lombardi*: for *Otello* and *Falstaff* he has but measured praise.

If the popularity of *Nabucco* in 1842 is no proof of artistic excellence, it would be unwise to ignore or to fail to recognize that it was due in great part to the appearance of new elements. The design may be conventional, but the handling of the material reveals vigour and originality. Verdi adheres to the old plan of arias and cabalettas; but the melody of the aria often goes deeper than in any opera of his predecessors, and the cabaletta, shorn of some of its florid ornamentation and rejuvenated, moves swiftly and impetuously. The so-called 'concertato' (the ensemble piece at the conclusion of an act or a scene) is at least not less masterly in Verdi than in Rossini, while the rich melodic invention gave the people what they most wanted—song. If political allusions were a contributory cause of success, it was the music that triumphed—not merely the symbolic picture of the sufferings of an enslaved nation or of the revolt against the enslaver.

The political appeal, discreetly veiled in *Nabucco*, becomes open and defiant in the next opera, *I Lombardi alla Prima Crociata*. The very title was a challenge. The 'crusade', in the minds of the listeners, had not the Holy Places for its objective, but the cities of Italy; and there were those who believed that just as the Pope had inspired the first crusade, the unity of the country could best be achieved by the formation of a confederation of free states presided over by the Pope. The subject was meant to remind Italians in general, and the Lombard city for which it was written in particular, of their ancient military glory; the music expressed in song what poets like Giusti and Fusinato expressed in their verses; it gave the nation an outlet for feelings that called for the song of the multitude. Long before the first performance could take place the authorities, scenting danger, had sought to interfere. The Archbishop of Milan heard that in the libretto of *I Lombardi* there were situations in which the rites of the church were copied, and begged the commissary of police to ban the opera. The commissary sent for the composer, the librettist, and the impresario to discuss alterations. The librettist and the impresario went alone; Verdi refused to go or to concede a single point. The conference must have had its comic side. The impresario (Merelli) appears to have acted as spokesman with great tact, pointing out that the opera had not a political but a religious aim, pleading that he and Solera were willing to make alterations and that Verdi alone was obdurate; but what could music have to do with politics? Verdi was a genius and, like all men of genius, wilful. A delicate hint that prohibition might evoke ridicule had a deciding effect. The commissary did not seem to like the thought of being remembered as the man who had been frightened by a tune. Protesting that he did not wish to clip the wings of



Interior of the Scala Opera House in Milan

promising genius, he allowed the performance. Something, however, had to be conceded to the archbishop, and so he insisted on altering 'Ave Maria' to 'Salve Maria'.

I Lombardi alla Prima Crociata was given at the Scala on February 11, 1843, with a good cast. Its success was even more decided than that of *Nabucco*. But its artistic value was distinctly less. It looks as if Verdi had taken too seriously his mission as the mouthpiece of Italian aspirations and had put the Mazzinian ideal before all other considerations. If he meant to write a national opera and nothing more, he succeeded admirably. The full-blooded tunes of *I Lombardi* have all the requirements of the popular song. They are easily remembered; they flow evenly; they can soothe or rouse passions. But the type is too manifestly popular for distinction, and both music and story are open to criticism on obvious grounds. Its most celebrated piece is a trio, which certainly stands well above the rest. If Verdi meant *I Lombardi* to stir patriotic feelings he succeeded; acclaimed in every Italian theatre, the opera was accepted as a national work which set the seal on his reputation as patriot and composer.

Even more enthusiastic was the success of the next opera, *Ernani* (on a libretto by Piave), performed in Venice on March 9, 1844, with Löwe, Guasco, and Selva in the principal rôles. The plot was derived from Victor Hugo's *Hernani*, even more 'romantic' than *Cromwell* the preface of which has been generally looked upon as the manifesto of romantic art. In the double translation from drama to libretto and from libretto to opera the play lost most of its romantic flavour acquiring instead political significance. The heroine asking to be freed from the unwelcome attentions of one of her lovers became the symbol of a country held forcibly in subjection. The hero was identified with an exiled patriot rather than with a bold outlaw. The scene in which the conspirators proclaim that, as descendants from a common stock, they will unite and defend their country became a rite in which the audience joined the singers.

The arias and cabalettas of *Ernani* have the merits and the faults of those of *Nabucco* and *I Lombardi*. *Ernani* lived longer than either of the other operas, not because of its arias or its subject but because of the great strength and impetus in the musical treatment of scenes with a patriotic appeal. It has been remarked that in *Ernani* no one behaves reasonably: 'three men love one woman and quarrel about her, shouting their love; they challenge one another; they live in hatred and rancour, agreeing only in the determination to destroy'. That restlessness, that determination, that eagerness reflected the mood of a people waiting the hour of deliverance and chafing at delay. More by the force of circumstances than by design the romantic drama became a 'topical' opera.

The libretto of *Ernani* is not without faults, even when considered

from the standpoint of the time. Of all Verdi's librettists, Piave was the one who most readily fell in with his wishes. Always willing to lengthen or shorten a scene, to add or to delete a line or two, he easily won the consideration of his leader who never tolerated a suggestion that did not fall in with his ideas. The story is told how once Verdi locked one of his librettists in a room, telling him that he would not be allowed to come out until he had written some stanzas that were required. On his return, finding that two lines were still wanting, he added them himself—they are not remarkable as poetry. It is said that whenever faults in the text were pointed out to Piave, his only answer was: 'the master wants it so'. One cannot help wondering whether Verdi would not have done better if he had found a librettist better able than Solera or Piave to provide a text of real dramatic and literary merit. The early Verdian operas owe everything to the music and nothing to the texts, which in design and in the words suggest a tradition more tyrannical than that which bound the composer to arias and cabalettas.

In spite of the purple patches, a performance of *Ernani* is apt to-day to leave us cold. By far the best music is in the scene of the conspiracy. The racy vigour and swing of its characteristic melody produces a more exhilarating effect than the pompous and pretentious chorus in *Les Huguenots*. Moreover, Verdi's conspirators behave, on the whole, more reasonably than those in Meyerbeer's opera. In *Les Huguenots* the loud shouts and the cat-like tread of the conspirators are worthy of the stage-craft of Vincent Crummles.

4

From 'I due Foscari' to 'Il Corsaro'

It is not within our purpose to examine the political worth of Mazzini's conception of a musician's duty—a conception more likely to find favour with the poet than with the statesman. In justice, however, to Mazzini—and to Verdi who fell in with his views—it must be acknowledged that the cause so dear to them gave them no choice of means. On the one side a nation demanded the right to decide its own affairs; on the other a few despots determined to prevent it; the bayonets and the cannon were all on the side of the despots. Hence the need, the desperate need, to use any weapon at hand. The deliberate choice of a patriotic text was unnecessary, for almost any text could be turned to account by a determined audience. *Nabucco* is derived from biblical sources; but Pizzi points out the analogy between the enslaved Jews and the Italians under foreign domination, between those who wept by the waters of Babylon and the patriots by the Arno and the Tiber, 'an echo of Italy's own voice lamenting the past and looking forward hopefully to the future'. In *I Lombardi* the analogy is more obvious. The conditions of the times explain the singular translation of *Ernani* from romantic drama into national opera. Nothing in the action of *I due Foscari* suggests an antagonism between the nation and its rulers. But as an episode of past history it was supposed to enforce the lesson that as political evils were to be traced to internal rivalries, so unity could secure a better future state. *Attila* marks a return to the obvious: for although the main theme is an imitation of the story of Judith and Holofernes, the leader of the Huns being slain by a woman, its real purpose is to bring on the stage the general Aethium and thus exalt Rome. One of its songs, says Pizzi, 'was heard in every town, was repeated at patriotic gatherings, in schools and workshops; it was sung by the whole suffering but hopeful nation'.

Half the plays that have been written could be made, by some slight rearrangement of emphasis, to yield as good a harvest. Any historical play depicting the rise of a nation under wise, or its decay under foolish, guidance would have suited the purpose of a patriotic writer. *Favorita* exhibits the manners of a corrupt court as well as *Rigoletto*; there is as much martial ardour in the music Gluck wrote for Achilles as in the music of *I Lombardi* or of Bellini's *I Puritani*. The end might be found without seeking.

To give to one country what is meant for mankind may be a virtue at a time of crisis. But art and politics have so little in common that a deliberate attempt to blend them generally ends in misalliance. A good cause does not make a good poem or a good tune. Politics—statesmanship, generalship—imply a genius for quick decision; a single flash of inspiration may determine the course of a battle on which contemporary opinion will award fame. The artist, too, must make his decisions—but more frequently his work is slow and laborious in comparison, and of its worth posterity is the best judge.

Now Verdi was a good patriot, heart and soul with the leaders of the revolutionary movement. We know that he was constantly corresponding with them, and that on one occasion, warned of the imminent visit of the police who suspected him and meant to search his house, he spent hours in burning compromising letters and documents. And Verdi succeeded marvellously in playing the part Mazzini had assigned to him. But he did not succeed because he was a patriot. He succeeded because he combined in himself all the qualities of the popular composer. Patriotism dictated to some extent the choice of subject—but it was his genius for popular music which carried the day. By his success he won the right to a place by the side of Mazzini and the other apostles of Italian independence. At the same time it is probable that as long as he remained faithful to the Mazzinian theory of art subservient to the political needs of the nation, he delayed his own artistic progress.

It must be admitted that the task of writing popular music (which is not the same thing as vulgar music) is far from easy, as its rarity proves. In obeying a very human and generous impulse, Verdi and his librettists had to overcome difficulties that should be taken into consideration. The librettist, after finding a subject and adapting it to the composer's requirements, had to hoodwink the censor. Verdi had to reckon with other factors.

Music may be the most democratic as it may be the most aristocratic of the arts; it cannot be both at the same time. If he meant to write for the masses, he had perforce to keep constantly in his mind the special requirements of popular music—music which needed no preparation in order to be understood, which would appeal at once to the ear and to the imagination. Anything with a loftier aim, demanding educated taste or a trained ear and understanding, would have been of no use to the patriots.

This meant that Verdi must use only the technical material to his hand, material already tested which could be quickly fashioned for a new purpose. The importance of this will be clear to anyone who has considered the relation between thought and form. Verdi was expected to express new thoughts and to cast them in old forms. He submitted to these conditions and conformed to them until *Macbeth*, which would

have been a greater opera had not by then a popular form and style become a habit.

If, then, in the circumstances, Verdi's librettists did less than well, and Verdi himself did less than his best, we need not look far for the reason.

The achievement, nevertheless, was unique of its kind. There is no other instance of a composer of opera who deliberately set out to fan patriotic fires and succeeded to the same extent. But other elements carried the music across the Alps, where, shorn of political meaning, the operas retained their power over the audience. And if they moved to applause peoples for whom Italy was 'a geographical expression', it is not difficult to understand how, wedded to words which clearly expressed the national sentiment, they roused in the Italians an enthusiasm which knew no bounds.

Attachment to the cause, the glamour and the reward of popular fame, the applause of the noblest of his compatriots—everything urged Verdi to work without relaxation. In five years he composed eight operas and revised two more. Success had come to him, and if it was not the kind of success he had dreamt of in the days of Margherita Barezzi, yet it brought applause, material comforts, authority; and he was determined to deserve it.

The tragedy by Byron on which *I due Foscari* (first performed in Rome, 1844) is based, is ill adapted for musical setting. Unlike *Il Trovatore* and *La Forza del Destino*, where the action is too varied and too swift for characterization, *I due Foscari* is wanting in movement and speed.

The protagonist is Francesco Foscari, the Doge of Venice, who signed with his own hand the death sentence on a son, guilty of having plotted against the Republic. Byron thought little of his work; if the subject did not satisfy the poet, it should have satisfied a composer still less. It does not seem improbable that Verdi was persuaded to accept it by the prospect of showing on the stage an example of fortitude and devotion to duty recalling ancient Roman virtues. Musically it does not mark a distinctive advance. But it is of some importance, since here Verdi for the first time identifies certain musical themes with characters in the opera. Donizetti heard *I due Foscari* and is reported to have said after the performance: 'This man is a genius. He has difficulty in finding themes, but once he has found them he presents them in such a way that we can never forget them again.' To the modern ear some themes—especially those of the 'cabalette'—seem but too facile.

In February 1845, a little over three months later, another opera, *Giovanna d'Arco*, had its first performance at the Scala, Milan. Here again the selection of the heroine was prompted by the wish that Italy, like France, might discover a heaven-sent leader. Neither text not music deserved the brief success the opera enjoyed. The librettist—Solera—

appears to have worked hurriedly, without a clear conception of the psychology with which he meant to invest the character of the heroine, to have been anxious to provide unusual opportunities for music (with heavenly and infernal choirs), and to weave into the plot a love interest between Joan of Arc and Charles VII. He concludes with a final scene in which the dead Joan comes to life only to die again. Had Verdi worked with less haste, or had his training in the art of the theatre been more thorough and more critical, he would never have accepted the text in this form. The career of *Giovanna* was short, even though some of the most celebrated singers appeared in the title rôle—Stolz and Adelina Patti amongst them. A favourable opinion of the music was expressed by Mazzucato, who praised in particular the restraint of its melodies and the skill of its orchestration.

Only six months later yet another opera was ready for the stage—*Alzira*, founded on a libretto adapted by Salvatore Cammarano from Voltaire's tragedy of the same name. It did not please the Neapolitans who were first asked to judge its merits. Some critics found one aria, others a few more, which they considered worthy of Verdi. On the whole a lower standard is admitted; *Alzira* must rank among the failures.

One might be tempted to think that the speed with which Verdi turned out these operas was beginning to tell, but for the fact that seven months after *Alzira* came *Attila*, one of the most fortunate of the operas of this period. Given for the first time in Venice on March 17, 1847, *Attila* soon won the heart of the nation, and every Italian audience proclaimed it a masterpiece. Bragagnolo and Bettazzi, in their life of Verdi, compare *Attila* to a foaming, crashing cascade. The modern musician is more likely to compare it to yesterday's bakemeats. The music is fluent enough, but its taste is no longer fresh and inviting. One cannot but feel that the structure is weak organically: it possesses a certain rude strength only too easily shown in the conventional manner. We are still a long way from excellence; the handicaps of an inadequate early training, and of a national mission, are too much for Verdi.

Before we condemn too hastily these immature works, let us remember also the custom of the day which imposed on the composer limits of time which would seem preposterous now. The idea of writing an opera in four months was not mere bravado but a necessity. The managers could not always make their plans far enough in advance; and, when an opera was wanted quickly, composer and performers had to submit and put the financial interests of the impresario first—another instance of the fatal effects resulting from the conditions of the theatre. Four months would hardly suffice for the copying of a modern full score.

Amongst the members of the syndicate controlling the Naples opera there was a certain Flauto who was very anxious that Verdi should be in Naples in good time for the rehearsals of *Alzira*. Verdi, no doubt, was

equally anxious to be present and would have gone but for an illness which made him delay his departure. The impresario thereupon wrote to him a letter such as one might expect from a man acquainted with the whims of tenors and prime donne, making light of Verdi's illness and suggesting the air of Naples as the best cure. Verdi resented it and replied briefly, enclosing a doctor's certificate. He also wrote to the librettist Cammarano, begging him to assure Flauto that he meant to do his duty now as scrupulously as he had always done.

In a second letter to Cammarano Verdi adds with a touch of bitterness: 'an artist is not allowed to be ill. Honesty does not count. Impresarios may believe us or not—it depends solely upon how their interests are affected.' In January 1846, while in Venice, he was again attacked by gastric fever, and the rehearsals for *Attila* had to be suspended. A proposal, which he had already accepted, from Lumley of Her Majesty's Theatre to come to London, had to be declined for the same reason. Taught by his experience with Flauto, Verdi sent medical certificates to the publisher, Lucca, then acting as intermediary between Verdi and the London impresario, with a request that they should be forwarded to Lumley. On the advice of his doctor he went to Recoaro to take a cure; before going he had to live on 'Gratz water', the recipe of which he notes down in the Copialettere: 'water and milk, mixed; at first three and then four glasses a day. Exercise and perspiration essential.' A homely cure.

In the meantime *I Lombardi* had been produced in London (March 12, 1846) and, according to Lumley, received with unanimous applause. The chief executants were Grisi, Mario, and Fornasari. Whatever the public attitude, it is certain that the critics did not accept it without serious reservations. Chorley spoke of the 'sickly cavatina for the tenor', which Mario, however, sang delightfully, and of the 'rude vigour of certain concerted pieces' which made a certain impression. He concluded with the statement that 'the opera did not stand'. There is no essential conflict of opinion between critic and impresario. The future has proved the former to be perfectly justified in his conclusion. The latter, satisfied with Mario's success and with the effect made by the 'rude vigour' which, as Chorley admits, roused the audience, was equally justified in claiming a victory for the composer and the performance. The critic looked for lasting qualities; the impresario was content with the immediate issue.

By far the most important opera of this period is *Macbeth* (1st performance Florence, March 14, 1847), for it provides us with our first clear view of Verdi's mind, of his maturer artistic conscience, which, dissatisfied with full-blooded patriotism, attempts to assert its right to a free choice of subject.

A composer who in the midst of popular triumphs could turn to *Macbeth* gives proof of exceptional character. This tragedy of barren

heaths and gloomy woods, of the darkening of a great soul, would pass over anyone to whom there is nothing but mystery in the mysterious, nothing but unreason in the unreasonable. The mystery must find its place, the unreasonable give its logical meaning before such a theme can inspire an artist with music or poetry. So, through *Macbeth* we get a glimpse of a side of Verdi's psychology more interesting than the vigour and freshness of his earlier operas.

Macbeth was the first manifestation of his profound love for Shakespeare. Verdi read Shakespeare, in Carcano's translation, all his life, as he read—oddly enough for one who never professed and never spoke of religion—the Bible. Although he never liked to answer critics, he protested with great warmth when some one accused him of not knowing Shakespeare. Unable to read the original, he had occasional misgivings, and Boito's interpolation of the Credo in *Otello* worried him more than he cared to admit. He looked upon Shakespeare as the supreme arbiter of all that relates to the theatre, and when an apostle of the new school had put the case for 'realism', Verdi retorted by inquiring whether Shakespeare could have drawn from life such characters as Iago and Cordelia, which are yet 'tremendously alive and real' on the stage.

To read a national purpose into the story of the Scottish thane may seem impossible, but Pizzi has done it.

'Amongst those deeds of blood perpetrated in silence and in darkness', he writes, 'the tender song of the Scottish exiles strikes us with its sweet and pure pity. They go aimlessly, sad, poor figures, through the barren countries, accompanied and comforted by Macduff, whose wife and innocent babes have been murdered by the usurper. Only one word is heard insistently, like a tolling bell, piercing through that saddest song; it is the voice of their native land, oppressed and betrayed, which alone kindles the hope that so much evil may awaken the vengeance of Heaven . . . . When the tyrant is killed in battle, the song of freedom rises from the Scottish bards, the song which first Florence and then all Italy acclaimed as a promise of the time that was quickly drawing near.'

Nothing of course was farther from Verdi's mind in writing *Macbeth* than to portray for a patriotic purpose the victory of Malcolm and Macduff. He chose Florence for the first performance in the hope that this, the most cultured of Italian cities, would not mistake politics for art and would give a verdict free from prejudice. These hopes were not realized.

Macbeth stands well above the rest of the early operas. It would be idle to pretend that it is anything but imperfect. Supernatural machinery has always been as much a stumbling-block to composers as natural phenomena. The witches' dance of the *Symphonie Fantastique* palls in the end as much as the bird-calls in the *Pastoral Symphony*, and Verdi had not the taste for the romantic which sent Berlioz to seek the footsteps of Salvator Rosa. Nothing but the full maturity of his genius could have done justice to the Shakespearian tragedy; but it is important to realize

Eugenia Tadolini

Erminia Frezzolini

Giuseppe Verdi (1846)

Giuseppina Strepponi

how, even at this early stage, Verdi felt its terrible glamour and did his utmost to translate it into music. That is perhaps the reason why he himself preferred it to any other opera he had written and went so far as to revise it thoroughly for its revival in Paris and Milan in 1865. He was not well served by the librettist Piave, whose verses seemed to him so ineffective that he later asked Andrea Maffei to improve them. He took exceptional pains to secure an adequate performance, and the interpreter of the part of Lady Macbeth has left it on record that the duet between soprano and baritone was rehearsed 151 times before the composer declared himself satisfied.

Macbeth had at first a good reception, but politics completely defeated Verdi's hope that an opera of his on a subject 'neither political nor religious' might be judged solely on artistic grounds. The unusual difficulties of the chief parts made production an expensive experiment; performances became rare, and the opera was less successful than its merits warrant. Yet it reveals a finer originality of thought and conception; a warmer, deeper dramatic sense, and may be said to point more surely to Verdi's mature style, than any opera he had written so far. It falls short of the highest standard because Verdi could not rid himself completely of conventionalism, because, too, the tools which he used were not keen enough to treat material that required so fine an edge.

Before leaving the subject of *Macbeth* we must turn to a letter written in 1848 in which Verdi discusses the suitability of a famous singer of the time, Mme Tadolini, for the part of Lady Macbeth. He writes to Cammarano at Naples:

'I know that you are rehearsing *Macbeth*, and as I take a greater interest in this than in any other opera of mine, you will allow me, I hope, to say a few words about it. The part of Lady Macbeth has been given to Mme Tadolini, and I am surprised that she should have undertaken it. You know how highly I think of Mme Tadolini—she knows it herself. But in the interests of everyone I cannot refrain from saying that Mme Tadolini has too many gifts for this part! This may seem absurd . . . but she looks good and beautiful, and I should like Lady Macbeth to look evil and ugly. Mme Tadolini sings to perfection, and I should prefer Lady Macbeth not to sing. Mme Tadolini has a splendid voice, clear, pure, and powerful; and I should like in Lady Macbeth a hard, hoarse, gloomy voice. Mme Tadolini's voice recalls an angel; I want a voice that suggests a devil. Please submit these considerations to the syndicate, to Mercadante who will be the first to see the justice of my remarks, and to Mme Tadolini herself.

'Note that there are two very important moments in the opera: the duet between Lady Macbeth and her husband, and the sleep-walking scene. If these fail, the whole opera falls to the ground. These two pieces must not on any account be sung. They must be acted and declaimed in a very sombre, veiled tone. Unless this can be done the whole effect will be lost.'

The first interpreter of Lady Macbeth, Mme Barbieri-Nini, complained that the sleep-walking scene cost her three months of work because Verdi wanted her to reproduce exactly the actions of a sleep-walker, speaking with hardly a movement of the lips, and with her limbs and eyes perfectly still and rigid.

From the concluding sentences in the letter it would seem that the music behind the scenes might be rewritten and adapted according to the resources of the theatre. He writes: 'The music under the stage will have to be reinforced for so vast a theatre: but I want neither trumpets nor trombones. The sound must come from afar; bass clarinets, bassoons, contra-bassoons, and nothing else.'

It was perhaps inevitable that an opera in which the best and most effective scene was 'not to be sung' should not please those who had looked upon Verdi as the heir of the Donizetti tradition which, absurdly enough, they claimed to be 'the' national tradition—as though Rossini and Donizetti had dominated all centuries of Italian music, and Palestrina and Monteverde had never been. By giving the chief scenes of *Macbeth* a dramatic rather than a lyrical form, Verdi showed himself not only a better dramatist, but much more in the 'Italian tradition': he went to the very sources of Italian opera for a style more supple, more suited to stage action than the lyrical. He did not forgo completely the use of lyricism; but he denied its supremacy, he denied that arias were infallible and inevitable; he sought a juster balance between the lyrical and the dramatic. Since the age of Donizetti abused lyricism, the only cure for the disease was to go back to the sources and seek there a better, truer tradition. There is no evidence to prove that Verdi turned deliberately to Monteverde's *Orfeo*, but he drew nearer to the *Incoronazione di Poppea* where one can see, as in some Dantesque circle, the souls of many an opera that had yet to be born. *Poppea* stands half-way between the purely dramatic and the purely lyrical. *Macbeth* is the first Italian opera of the nineteenth century to admit the need for lyrical restraint and to make a wider use of an essentially dramatic style.

Since the whole evolution of Verdian opera depends on this distinction and on the development of dramatic out of lyric form; since the partisans of 'melody' of any quality (provided it be in great quantity) have accused Verdi of following foreign models in his later works, it is worth remembering that when *Macbeth* was written, Wagner had composed only *The Flying Dutchman* and *Tannhäuser*, and it is certain that Verdi knew nothing of either.

I have said 'evolution' and not 'reform' because nothing was farther from Verdi's mind than the thought of a reformation. It must not be supposed for a moment that he deliberately chose the subject of *Macbeth* in order to give a practical application to a new theory. As a matter of fact *Macbeth* was chosen purely on grounds of expediency. Verdi had

recommended the engagement of two of the chief singers for the Florentine company—the tenor, Fraschini, and the soprano, Mme Loewe. The syndicate secured Mme Loewe but failed to come to terms with the tenor. Verdi then chose *Macbeth* rather than *L'Avola* or *I Masnadieri* (both were under consideration) because the tenor part was of secondary importance and could be entrusted without much risk to a singer unknown to him. As it happened, even Mme Loewe was thought inadequate for the part of Lady Macbeth, and her place, as has been said, was taken by Mme Barbieri-Nini.

Verdi was not a strategist fighting a battle according to a new idea of war; he was rather the tactician who, faced with a new situation, throws aside all customary methods and without a moment's hesitation evolves a new, more efficient plan. He did not choose *Macbeth* to propound a new creed: but having chosen it, he recognized the inadequacy of the old. By a strange irony this composer of music 'which was not to be sung' has since become the hobbyhorse of singers who roar.

The same year (1847) saw the production of *I Masnadieri* in London (July 22) conducted by Verdi, whom Lumley had persuaded to add by his presence to the interest of a season which needed a new stimulus. The public had lost confidence in Lumley's ventures after his quarrel with the conductor Costa which had ended in the retirement of the latter from the position he had held at Her Majesty's Theatre and his acceptance of a similar position at Covent Garden. *I Masnadieri*, however, proved unsuccessful both in London and, later, in Italy. It was written almost simultaneously with *Macbeth*; but while the Shakespearian tragedy filled Verdi's heart and mind, only a sense of duty and a lukewarm attachment to the subject urged him to complete the second score.

The first visit to London was a disappointment. But Verdi was touched by Lumley's courtesy and thanked him with a warmth rare in him for his kind treatment. Lumley, for his part, still believed in the possibility of their collaboration, and suggested that Verdi should return the following year with a new opera, and also conduct the other operas of the season. Verdi, after taking some time to reply, declared himself ready to come if paid 60,000 francs (about £2,400) for the new opera, and half that sum for conducting the season from February to August. The project, however, came to nothing.

Verdi's first impressions of London were not favourable; they are found in a letter he wrote to his friend Clarina Maffei. On June 9 he describes briefly the journey and his visit to the Opera at Paris: 'I have never heard worse singers or so mediocre a chorus. Even the orchestra (with all deference to our "lions") is but little removed from mediocrity. . . . Of London I cannot say anything, because yesterday was Sunday and I did not see a soul. I dislike the smoke and the smell of coal . . . . Jenny Lind is a very great favourite here and I am most anxious to hear

her. . . . I arrived late and the impresario has the right to complain; but if he says one word to me I will say ten to him and return to Paris.'
On the 27th he writes again, complaining of the smoke, but: 'On the other hand—what a magnificent city! There are things here that leave one spellbound. . . . If the sky of Naples were here I should long for Paradise no more. . . . The houses of entertainment are packed, and the English, who greatly enjoy the theatre, pay high prices.' After the performance of *I Masnadieri* he wrote to Emilia Morosini: 'Although the climate of London is horrible, I liked the town extremely. It is not a town but a world; there is nothing in existence to compare with it in wealth and magnificence, in the beauty of the streets, the neatness of the houses. One feels astonished and humbled when amongst so many magnificent things one comes to the Bank and the Docks. Who can withstand the spell of this nation? The country round London is stupendous. I do not like many English customs—or, I should rather say, they are not becoming in us Italians. How ridiculous are certain English imitations in Italy!' He takes a more sober view of the success of *I Masnadieri* than his friend Muzio, who described it as 'nothing but applause, acclamations, recalls, and encores from the prelude to the last finale'.

'*I Masnadieri*', writes Verdi, 'without arousing enthusiasm, pleased the audience. I have been asked to return to London, and I would accept but for my engagement to write an opera for the publisher Lucca.'

Elsewhere Verdi complains again of Lucca's 'stupidity' and selfishness. He had offered to pay 10,000 francs to be released from the contract but Lucca refused the offer which a wiser man would have accepted. To rid himself of the importunate publisher, Verdi wrote in great haste the opera *Il Corsaro* which, produced at Trieste (Oct. 25, 1848), proved a complete failure. The short-sighted impresario thus lost the expenses of the production as well as 10,000 francs and the goodwill of the composer.

It is not to be thought that *Il Corsaro* was a cruel joke perpetrated to teach a fool good manners. But it received scant care and concentration, and the result could hardly have been different. Hustle and importunities do not kindle the imagination. Lucca's actions, moreover, appear to have been not only tactless and foolish, but also lacking frankness. If he was within his right in claiming the opera, he was exceeding his right in putting pressure on Lumley. That he did so appears evident from the fact that when Verdi wrote signifying his readiness to return to London on certain conditions, Lumley answered withdrawing the offer 'in your interest as well as my own'. The only explanation that can be put forward for the sudden change of front is that Lucca, unknown to Verdi, had induced Lumley by threats or promises to cancel the arrangement. Sick of these 'stupidities', the composer decided 'not to write a work of great importance for the presumptuous and indelicate Signor Lucca'.

5

From 'La Battaglia di Legnano' to 'Rigoletto'

AFTER leaving London Verdi went to Paris for some months of quiet work. He liked Paris less than London. But lavish expenditure on productions and unlimited time for rehearsal were privileges he valued. After the success of *I Lombardi*, however, his stay became less pleasant; he was besieged by not always welcome visitors. The news from Italy, where revolt had broken out, hastened his return there. Two months later he was back in Paris, probably at the request of the Italian revolutionaries who hoped to induce French politicians to support the Italian claims. With other Italians resident in the French capital he signed a manifesto addressed to the French Government, requesting immediate aid against Austria. Unlike many of his countrymen, however, Verdi did not believe that French intervention was altogether desirable: France—he thought—would consent, at most, to an Austrian evacuation of Lombardy, but would not support the Italian claims on Venice. This is what occurred eleven years later. He also believed that the constitution of the Austrian Empire was bound to end in disruption. But in this he was eighty years in advance of the time.

At the request of Mazzini, whom he had known in London, he wrote a popular song, which he sent to Milan expressing the hope that it might be sung on the Lombard plains to the accompaniment of gun fire. It arrived too late to be of use.

During his brief stay at Milan he took the opportunity to visit Busseto again and buy the villa of Sant' Agata, where his father went to live the following year.

Before we consider the three operas which precede *Rigoletto* it is necessary to go back for a moment to *I Masnadieri*: for while Verdi was working on the plans for that opera, the idea came to him to set *King Lear* to music. The subject indeed haunted him all his life. The reason that has been given for its failure to materialize is the lack of love interest —'Where there is no love there is no music', he is reported to have said. If ever Verdi said this, he said that which he did not believe: there is no love in *Macbeth*, the opera he cherished above all other; there is little love-making in *Otello*, the subject of which is jealousy; and love is but the frame which encircles the merry scenes of *Falstaff*.

A sounder reason for avoiding *King Lear* is found in a letter he wrote to Antonio Somma, one of his librettists. 'I have read *King Lear* again,

he writes, 'it is marvellously beautiful; but I am appalled at the thought of having to reduce that vast canvas to small proportions, and at the same time do justice to the greatness and originality of each character and to the drama itself.' Another attempt was made later: a scenario was sketched and sent to another librettist, Cammarano. When Somma undertook to write the words, Verdi went so far as to make other sketches. Later, Carcano, the translator of Shakespeare, suggested Hamlet as a suitable theme; Verdi refused, pleading that *Hamlet*, like *King Lear*, needed very long preparation, and implying that he had not yet given up all hope of Lear. He made some plans in 1857, but again abandoned the idea, alleging that he did not know singers capable of such parts. All thought of *King Lear* seems then to have been abandoned. But after *Aïda*, and again after *Otello*, it was widely rumoured that he was again engaged on *King Lear*.

The decline in Verdi's fortunes did not last long. Three months after the failure of *Il Corsaro*, Rome was enraptured by a new opera founded on an episode of Italian history. *La Battaglia di Legnano* celebrates the defeat of the Emperor Frederic I by the armies of the Lombard League at Legnano. The police insisted on some changes of places and names. To please the censor, the rival forces contended for the possession of Harlem; Frederic lost the imperial purple and became a Duke of Alba, and the chorus which acclaimed Italy had to be content with singing the praise of Holland.

The subterfuge was completely unsuccessful. The songs in the opera won the heart of the public, who restored the original names. *La Battaglia di Legnano* (first performed in January 1849) undoubtedly owed some of its vogue to the patriotic theme and the political situation, but it was more than an excuse for political demonstrations.

The opera is a patriotic sermon in music and, like all topical sermons, lost its interest when the moment had passed. The love of Arrigo for a woman who, believing him dead, has married his friend, forms but the pretext for scenes which, although nominally concerned with Frederic Barbarossa, really reproduce the condition which existed in Italy in 1848. Como, which takes part with the Emperor against the League, stands for the reactionaries who in 1848 made combined action impossible. Arrigo's impassioned address to the rulers of Como is in reality a manifesto of Italian unity. Such scenes did not fail to stir the public of '48. To us the artificiality of the drama is no less patent than the vigour and vivid colour of Verdi's music. There are some capital pages, but nothing that Verdi did not say in more polished form later. It is chiefly interesting for certain melodic designs which served him well in later operas, including *Otello*, and for the tide of passion which surging through the music swept contemporary listeners off their feet.

The year 1848 saw the first Italian revolt quelled and the triumph of

reaction. The failure of long-cherished hopes brought in its train suspicion, distrust, pessimism, and perhaps to this may be ascribed in part the profound, if unconvincing, gloom of *Luisa Miller* which, composed at Sant'Agata, was first produced in December of that year.

This work deserves study on many grounds. In the first place the technique of the music is finer and subtler than before. The idyllic theme of the first act is treated with a light touch not to be found in any of the operas which preceded it. There is also greater tenderness; the melody has acquired greater power of expression and admirably fits the sad story. The plot, derived from Schiller, is far from perfect, but the music lights up some of its dark places and, to some extent, reconciles us to what would seem otherwise a wholly unnecessary tragedy. It may be that the generation which acclaimed *Luisa Miller* liked grim horror in opera, just as to-day some like it in fiction. But tragedy, to convince us, should spring from some human weakness, from some motive, some passion, that we can understand. As Synge's Pegeen remarks, there is all the difference between a gallows story and a dirty deed. The villain of *Luisa Miller* is a sordid criminal without any redeeming feature to justify his portrayal on the stage. The obstacles to the loves of Rodolfo and Luisa are two: Rodolfo's father—Count Walter—who wants his son to marry an heiress; and a slighted lover of Luisa's who, aware that the Count has committed a murder, uses his knowledge to further his own schemes and blackmail the father.

If Rodolfo and Luisa are ready to die rather than separate, it would seem to be far simpler for them to take the obvious course and make a runaway match of it. There is the germ of tragedy in the Count who sees himself robbed of the fruit of his crime by the very son for whose sake the crime was committed. The libretto, on the other hand, makes much of Luisa's father—another and wholly unnecessary victim of the Count's lust for power. An aria for the tenor has survived—'Quando le sere al placido'. It is a typical Verdian melody, of simple yet warm eloquence, planned on the old model, but so effective that we can understand why a public which looked upon arias as indispensable came to rave about it.

Luisa Miller should be read together with *La Battaglia di Legnano*. When the two are considered alongside, the wide range of Verdi's talents becomes apparent. And the time was not far when he was to show all that was in him. In November 1850 a new opera, *Stiffelio*, produced at Trieste, failed partly owing to an absurd libretto. This, the last of the operas which have now been forgotten, was followed by *Rigoletto*, which was the real beginning of that long career of popularity which still continues.

In March 1850 the directors of the Fenice Theatre in Venice asked him for a new opera. At the end of May the contract for *Rigoletto* was signed and the composer accepted the libretto Piave had written for him.

Three months later, however, the manager of the theatre began to have misgivings and to fear that the censor might forbid the production of an opera in which a reigning duke was shown in very unfavourable light. Verdi was appealed to and answered at once, saying that the opera had already reached the final stages, and that rather than turn to another subject he would ask for the contract to be rescinded; but the Austrian censor, on the strength of a report that Verdi was writing music for *Le Roi s'amuse*, wrote at once to the directors of the Fenice demanding the libretto, and pointing out that Victor Hugo's drama had been unfavourably received in Paris and in Germany owing to its 'licentiousness'. The libretto was duly submitted (the title was then *La Maledizione*) and was banned in an official communication which is worth reporting:

'His Excellency the Military Governor Chevalier de Gorzkowski in his respected dispatch of the 26th instant directs me to communicate to you his profound regret that the poet Piave and the celebrated Maestro Verdi should have found no better field for their talents than the revolting immorality and obscene triviality which forms the argument of the libretto entitled 'La Maledizione', submitted to us for eventual performance at La Fenice.

'His Excellency has decided that the performance must be absolutely forbidden, and wishes me at the same time to request you to abstain from making further inquiries in this matter.'

This document was forwarded at once to Verdi with the suggestion that he should write another opera on a different subject. Verdi replied at once declaring that another opera was utterly out of the question: 'The ban exasperates me because it is impossible, absolutely impossible, for me to write music for another libretto this winter. . . . You know that I finished *Attila* when I was nearly dying, solely in order to keep my word. I repeat, I could not write another opera now. . . .' He suggested *Stiffelio* as a possible substitute, offering to rewrite the last scene.

It happened, however, that the very secretary who had forwarded the censor's decision, himself a keen lover of music, was deeply disappointed at the prospect of missing so interesting a première as a new opera of Verdi. Perhaps the obscure official had the soul of a Maecenas. At any rate, in spite of the Military Governor's refusal to entertain further proposals, he arranged a meeting with Piave and reopened the discussion. Piave was only too willing to listen. Some alterations were agreed upon; the title was altered to *The Duke of Vendôme* and a new sketch was sent to Verdi by the Director of the Fenice Theatre, also a party to the plan. Verdi answered with a firm but reasoned refusal to consider the censor's alterations, which it is clear from his letter were not only arbitrary but absurd. His Excellency the Military Governor Gorzkowski objected apparently to the duke's being represented as a libertine, and preferred the ruler of even so hypothetical a country to appear as a

namby-pamby but discreet young man. He would have no curses in the opera; he objected to the idea of Gilda's body being sewn in a sack; he objected, above all, to a father who dared to upbraid a duke for seducing his daughter. Finally, he wanted Rigoletto not to be a hunchback.

Verdi urged that these amendments completely altered the character of the drama so that all the most important situations lost their point. The curse invoked by a prisoner condemned for no known reason could never have the same force as a call to heaven for vengeance from one who, having suffered bitter wrong, was imprisoned for asking redress. That is—Verdi insisted—the point of the drama; if it is altered the whole action collapses. If the duke is no longer a libertine, wrote Verdi, Rigoletto has no more reason to fear for his daughter's honour, and his revenge becomes an act of senseless brutality. What interest, he asks, can the police have in the sack which holds Gilda's body? Do they think themselves better qualified to gauge the effect of the drama, than the composer? Neither the censor nor the composer could foretell the effect of a hunchback on the stage, though he himself had faith in the human appeals of misshapen Rigoletto. In conclusion he says:

'If I am told that my music will fit this version as well as the other, I reply that such an argument is utterly beyond me; my music—good or bad as it may be—is written in no casual manner. I invariably try to give it a character of its own . . . . They have turned an original and powerful drama into a frigid commonplace. I can only repeat what I have already said; as a conscientious artist I cannot set this (revised) libretto to music.'

The letter convinced Verdi's Venetian friends. Another conference took place, in which it was agreed that the composer should have a free hand on condition that the court should be no longer the court of France but that of the Medici (or of Burgundy, or of Normandy) and that the abduction scene 'did not offend the decorum of the stage'. There were difficulties in finding an adequate cast, the absence of a contralto aria being one of them. A Mme Casaloni (her name deserves to be remembered) finally consented to sing Maddalena even though there was no aria for her. On January 24 Piave wrote from Venice that all was going well; the censor had been finally placated by changing the Duke of Gonzaga into a Duke of Mantua, Capriano into Ceprano, and Castiglione into Monterone.

On January 25 the text of *Rigoletto* received the *nihil obstat* of the authorities. Verdi reached Venice towards the middle of February, and the rehearsals began. The greatest secrecy was observed, and the parts were copied privately under the immediate supervision of a trusted friend. The popular air for the tenor, 'La Donna è mobile', was given to the singer only a day before the dress rehearsal. The object of this secrecy was not perhaps, as has been suggested, to prevent the tunes

from being whistled in the streets before the performance, but to avoid premature discussion as Verdi was well aware that *Rigoletto* differed essentially from anything he had done before.

Problems of construction did not greatly concern the Italian opera-lover of 1850. But Verdi in writing and in planning *Rigoletto* was perfectly aware that he had thrown over a good many cherished conventions. To a singer who had asked him to write another aria for Gilda he wrote:

'If you were convinced that my talents can do nothing better than *Rigoletto*, you would not ask me for another aria. What miserable talents!—you will say. Granted; but so it is. Moreover, if *Rigoletto* can pass muster as it stands, to write another number would mean one number too many . . . . Let me add that I have conceived *Rigoletto* without arias, without final tableaux, just as an endless succession of duets because this form alone satisfied me. If others say: "he should have done thus and thus", I answer: that may well be so, but what I have done is the best I can do.'

Modern interpreters of the opera, honest and modest enough to wish to do justice to the composer, should discover for themselves the importance of those two words: 'without arias'.

Even 'Caro nome'—invariably interpreted either as a piece of vocal gymnastics or as a spelling exercise—was meant differently. To the same correspondent he says: 'I do not know where "agility" comes in. Perhaps you have mistaken the tempo which should be *Allegretto molto lento*. If the pace is correct and the tone *sotto voce* there can be no question of difficulty. Obviously what he requires is utmost simplicity of manner and softness of tone, something apt for the musings of a girl over the name of her lover which has just been revealed to her. Scales and roulades indeed form part of the texture of the melody but their real purpose and value is only apparent if they are treated as all reputable violinists have ever treated the embroidered passages of Beethoven's Violin Concerto—delicate and graceful designs but of secondary importance and subsidiary to the main themes.

It was characteristic of Verdi to adopt what to him was a sweeping reform and only reveal the fact casually in answering the importunate request of a singer. In consequence the public which first applauded *Rigoletto* (March 11, 1851) was quite unaware that anything new had been attempted, apart from the lilt and design of the melody. They realized, however, that never before had Verdi shown such complete mastery of a dramatic situation, or produced a *recitativo* so eloquent, so apt. There are points in *Rigoletto* so simple that learned men have failed to understand them. The storm of the third act is one of them. A pedant might suggest that certain rapid arpeggios for the wood-wind can never be anything but arpeggios, that the chorus parts are a mere succession of

descending thirds and not the moaning of the wind. That is the attitude of those who see in thunder and lightning 'atmospheric phenomena due to a mass of waterdrops at an electrical potential very different from that of the earth'. The definition is accurate; but scientific accuracy is not the artist's aim. On no such grounds can criticism of *Rigoletto* be based. The opera is unquestionably open to attack in some respects. In the first and in the second act, there are not a few pages undistinguished in conception and somewhat careless in style. The ingenious theory has been put forward (by those who prefer *Nabucco* to *Falstaff*) that the music assigned to the duke is neither more nor less undistinguished than Verdi intended; that he purposely wrote commonplace music to describe a commonplace character. The argument has plausibility but no foundation. If we admit that undistinguished music must be written for undistinguished personages, we must go farther and advocate unpleasant music for an unpleasant situation, and villainous music for a villain. Verdi was too great an artist not to know the difference between a fact and its artistic presentation. *Rigoletto* is clearly as inferior to *Aïda* as *Aïda* is to *Otello*. But *Rigoletto* lives because its fine qualities are of far greater moment than any weakness. For the first time we meet a Verdian opera in which technical lapses are completely overshadowed by what, for want of a better word, we call inspiration. Some of the tools may be blunt but they carve an image which is the exact representation of the composer's idea. The harmonization is still simple, sometimes even monotonous; yet the characterization is clear. Every situation is well defined. Verdi's lyric genius has overcome obstacles and created the famous quartet in the third act which remains to this day unsurpassed of its kind. Its peculiarity is not only in the differentiation of character; in other quartets—and especially in the quartet in *Otello*—we also find the voices blending harmoniously while each thread has dramatic significance. The peculiar value of the *Rigoletto* quartet lies in the fact that in spite of the contrasting emotions each person expresses, every line, every thread is finely and exquisitely lyrical. It is the combination of distinct, poetic designs that gives to the composition its irresistible impetus and its fascination. How difficult it is to resist this force is shown by an incident of which I was a witness. In a small seaside town, a company of entertainers were giving a performance ending with a burlesque of scenes from *Faust*, *Carmen*, and *Lohengrin*, and the quartet of *Rigoletto*. The jest was not very subtle, but the scenes chosen from the first operas lent themselves easily to caricature and the singers made their points tell. When they came to *Rigoletto* there was a change. The words were parody, but there was no trace of a jest in the execution. These unhappy clowns were no longer clowning, but singing (or rather roaring), serious as judges, away from the world, helpless, completely under the sway of the music they meant to have ridiculed.

After Venice, *Rigoletto* went through a period of storm. At Rome the censor again interfered and Verdi, thoroughly disgusted, wrote to his friend Luccardi: 'The impresarios still fail to understand that if operas cannot be produced integrally, as they have been conceived by the author, they had better not be produced at all. . . .' He found it difficult to refrain from making a public declaration that *Stiffelio* and *Rigoletto*, as produced in Rome, were no longer his operas. In England critics frowned upon the music and Italian writers have been shocked at the bitter tone of the notices which appeared in *The Times* and in *The Athenaeum*. I find Chorley's notice both fair and interesting—after making due allowance for the bias from which no critic is wholly free. Chorley detested Verdi as he detested Wagner—because he was heart and soul with the old school. It was inevitable that one who professed unbounded admiration for Rossini should find *Rigoletto* wanting in restraint and grace. Verdi himself would have acknowledged such qualities to be foreign to his dramas. All things considered, Chorley seems to have been broadminded. It may seem to us absurd to lament 'the absence of anything like gaiety in Signor Verdi's music' and to deplore that light-heartedness had vanished from Italian opera. Why should Italian opera be more light-hearted than French or German opera, especially during the years of the revolution? But Chorley was not alone in expecting from all Italians the easy artificiality of the Rossini era—possibly because of the great popularity of *The Barber of Seville* and *L'Elisir d'Amore*. Poets and moralists could be as grim as they liked, and Leopardi's pessimism was never considered an artistic error; but the poor musician's function was to smile and sing.

On the other hand, what is more natural than to lament the disappearance of a style that has given us pleasure? Chorley delighted in the old aria with its bravura, 'in which passionate despair and resolution run riot without breaking the bounds of beauty in music'. Who could maintain that there is 'elegance with mirth' in Verdi's dance music or that 'elegance with mirth' is not, at times, a desirable quality? All that we can say is that other qualities are also desirable and that to some qualities in which Verdi excels Chorley was blind. But he paid him just tribute when he said that 'Signor Verdi had one merit and this a great one—earnestness in attempting dramatic expression', and that 'what is good in his music betokens a certain elevation of instinct and ambition'. It is true that he qualified this by deploring Verdi's 'paltry musical culture'. But the 'culture' of every artist gifted with a strong individual temperament is often paltry at the beginning.

Beethoven's teachers were equally certain that their pupil knew nothing. Albrechtsbeger thought Beethoven 'had learnt nothing and would never do much good' and Ries says of him that being headstrong and obstinate he had to learn through 'hard experience' what he refused to

accept from his teachers. There is nothing obscure in this. One of the tasks of every composer of genius and originality is the creation of a new idiom; and when he is made to study the old grammar he is apt to show impatience. An interest in his predecessors and their idioms may come later; the first instinct, the first need, is to find and test his own strength.

6

Giuseppina Strepponi

ONE of Verdi's earliest friends and admirers was Giuseppina Strepponi, the singer, whose praise had been instrumental in securing the first performance of *Conte Oberto*, and whose fine interpretation of the part of Abigaille in *Nabucco* had contributed to its success. Admiration for the music soon became admiration for the composer; the feeling ripened into friendship, and friendship opened the door for a closer intimacy. To Verdi it was not love's young dream. He could not forget so easily his early marriage and its tragic dissolution. But he appreciated the uncommon qualities of Giuseppina Strepponi's character, and repaid her devotion with ever-increasing care and an affection second only to her attachment to himself. In the circumstances it is not easy to see why the union was not at once legalized. It may be that after his first experience, Verdi revolted at the thought of going again through a form of marriage. Perhaps he was touched by the secrecy of his new love.

He had too a strong, innate love of independence which, coupled with complete disregard of public opinion, made him recoil from conventional forms. The liaison harmed no one, and he believed that no one had the right to inquire into the relations of any two human beings.

In Paris the union aroused no comment. But after a while Verdi and Giuseppina Strepponi, at the pressing instance of the latter, left for Busseto, whose homely inhabitants knew not such tolerance. Verdi at first affected to ignore the rumours and attacks of the gossips. But there remained at Busseto one man to whom he was attached by many ties. When Verdi found that Barezzi had grown cold and distant, he wrote to him a letter which is perhaps one of the most interesting documents in the Copialettere.

'After so long a silence I did not expect to receive from you so formal a letter containing expressions which, if I interpret them correctly, hurt me a good deal. If it were not signed by my benefactor Antonio Barezzi, I should answer it very curtly, or not at all. But since it bears a name which it will be my duty ever to respect, I must try to persuade you that I do not deserve your blame . . . .

'I do not believe you could have written it on purpose to hurt me, if you had been following only your own instinct. But you live amongst people with a bad habit of prying into the affairs of others, and of condemning anything which does not conform to their own standards. It is

my custom never to interfere with my neighbours—unless I am requested to do so—and I expect others not to interfere with me. I have the right to expect in my own country the same liberty of action that is allowed in less civilized places. Judge this for yourself, severely but without bias: if I prefer a quiet, retired life and the care of my farmlands to calling on the gentry and social gatherings—where is the harm of it, who is the worse for it?

'I have so far spoken of my own opinions, my own actions, my own desires, my life in relation to others; but since the moment has come for frankness, I have not the slightest objection to raising the curtain which hides the mystery of four walls, and telling you of my home life. I have nothing to hide. In my house there lives a lady, free, independent, like myself a lover of the country, the possessor of a private fortune which places her beyond the reach of need. Neither of us has to account for our actions to anybody. On the other hand, who knows what our relations may be, or the bond between us? What claims I have on her and what claims she has on me, whether she is my wife or not, and whether there are special reasons for avoiding publicity? Who knows whether this is good or bad? Can there not be some good in it, and if there be evil, who has the right to ostracize us? I will say this, however: in my house she is entitled to the deference due to myself—nay, more; and on no consideration whatever must this be forgotten; her conduct and her character give her a special claim to the consideration she never fails to show to others.

'With this long rigmarole I mean to demand for myself (since my nature refuses to bow to the will of others) such liberty of action as all men may claim as their right. And I beg you, so good at heart and so just, not to be influenced by the attitude of a place which once considered me unworthy of being its organist and now finds much to criticize in my affairs. This position cannot continue; if it does, I shall take steps to end it and the fear of losing 20 or 30 thousand francs will not deter me from seeking the hospitality of another country. If by any chance I have written anything that displeases you, ignore it; for, on my honour, I have no intention of causing you displeasure. I have always thought and still think of you as my benefactor—that is my boast and my pride.'

In translating this letter, as literally as is consistent with clearness, I have omitted only a section which has no bearing on Giuseppina Strepponi. But if some passages are obscure, if, for all the promises of frankness, of laying bare the motives for his actions, he tells us little that we did not know and nothing that was new to Barezzi, it is because despite his protestations of liberty, his assurance forsakes him in the presence of Barezzi; he draws a red herring across the trail by suggesting the possibility of a marriage kept secret for a mysterious purpose. It is an instance of sentiment overcoming reason. Verdi felt that he had done nothing that reason condemned; his feelings and his past suggested a different conclusion. Reason upheld him against the world; against Barezzi

sentiment won, and the man of few words writes many to say little; his honesty, his devotion to duty and truth are so far forgotten as to allow him, if not actually to say, to suggest a falsehood. There is something pathetic in this, in the man with an iron will pleading excuses like a schoolboy, in the repeated protest 'where is the harm?' (he well knows what answer Barezzi can give), in the suggestion that he is no worse than his neighbour, that no one has a right to cast stones—as if he were not or did not know that he was infinitely better than his neighbour. There is also something ludicrous in the lion of Paris becoming a pariah in Busseto. To resort to a trick in order to prove himself worthy of friendship may be a sad way of showing gratitude, but it is also a very clear proof that gratitude and respect were very much alive in Verdi.

The letter is dated 1852: the marriage was celebrated in April 1859 at Collange in Savoy. We know nothing of the reasons which made Verdi change his mind and bow to the common usage of the world. But the union was most happy both before and after the ceremony. Giuseppina Strepponi made an ideal companion, understanding and sympathetic. Her position has been compared to that of a Prince Consort, and the comparison is apt except that a Prince Consort can share in the burdens of state government to a greater extent than any composer's wife can share in her husband's activities. And we know that Verdi at work was as intractable as a lion at bay.

More than a love match, the bond resembled an ideal friendship where affection is stable and continuous, without the ecstasies but also without the insanity of passion. The two were inseparable companions, and we owe Giuseppina a great debt for her letters, which throw a new light on Verdi and depict various aspects of their life together. That the union should have been so happy is remarkable, considering the different views the two held on one or two important subjects. She loved the country, which he, at first, disliked—probably because associated in his mind with an unhappy childhood. She was deeply religious while he professed agnosticism. Verdi was soon converted to her views in respect of country life, but he never came to share her positive religion. Both subjects are discussed in her letters. To their common friend, Clarina Maffei, she writes in 1867:

'Many years ago—I dare not say how many—having a great longing for the country I asked Verdi to leave Paris to seek under an open sky the light and air which give strength to the body and tranquillity to the mind. Verdi who, like Auber, had almost a horror of the country, consented, after much persuading, to take a little house outside Paris. The new life was a revelation to him. He came to love it so that my prayer to the woodland gods was answered but too well. He bought the estate of Sant' Agata, and I, who had already furnished a house in Milan and one in Paris, had to build up a pied-à-terre on the new estate at Le Roncole.

With infinite pleasure we soon began our plans for a garden which was to be called Peppina's garden. Then the plans were extended and became *his* garden; and now he plays the Tsar there, my own plot being reduced to a few feet of ground where it is mutually agreed, he has no right to show his nose. I cannot conscientiously say that he keeps to the agreement, but I have found a way of calling him to order by threatening to grow cabbages in his bower. As the garden grew in extent and beauty, the need for something more comfortable than a farmland cottage became manifest. Verdi turned architect; and I cannot tell you how often during the building operations beds, wardrobes, and furniture danced from room to room. It is enough to say that except for the kitchen, the cellar, and the stables, we have slept and eaten our meals in every nook in the house.

'When the fate of Italy was at stake and Verdi went with other gentlemen to King Victor with the fate of Italy in their pockets, Guerrieri, Fioruzzi, &c., came to Sant' Agata and had the honour of dining in a sort of anteroom, or rather corridor adorned with birds' nests where swallows flew in and out carrying food for their young. As soon as Heaven willed it the house was finished; and I assure you that Verdi did his part as well as, and perhaps better than a real architect. And here was a fourth house to furnish.

But the sun, the trees, the flowers, and the vast family of birds that make the country so lively and beautiful for the greater part of the year, leave it in the winter sad, barren, mute. Then I love it no longer. When the snow covers the plain, trees with their naked branches look like bare skeletons, and I dare not raise my eyes to look around. I curtain the windows man-high and I find only an infinite sadness, a craving to run away and reassure myself that I am amongst living beings and not amongst ghosts in a huge cemetery. Verdi—an iron nature—still loves the country in winter and would have discovered pleasures and occupations abreast of the season. But his goodness saw my isolation and sadness, and after much wavering we have pitched our tent for the winter close to the sea and mountains. And I am now furnishing the fifth and certainly the last house of my life.'

Here she was mistaken, for Fate had another removal in store for her, and ten years later she had to write to Clarina: 'Verdi' (she never speaks of him as 'my husband' but always as 'Verdi') 'has gone back to the country with a legion of workmen. I am living in an inferno because we are moving to the first floor of the Palazzo, and for the moment the disorder and noise are intolerable. This will certainly be our last move. . . .' And the distracting situation leads her thoughts still farther—'The very last will mean four boards—and then eternal peace!'

Her views on religion are set forth in two admirable letters, the first addressed to Cesare Vigna (May 1872) and the other to Clarina Maffei a few months later. To Vigna (who was a doctor) she writes:

'Verdi thinks too highly of you not to listen to what you tell him; and he places you, though a medical man, amongst the spiritual natures.

But, between ourselves, he is the strangest phenomenon in the whole world. He is not a physician, but an artist; everybody agrees that nature endowed him with the divine fire of genius; he is a paragon of honesty, he understands and feels the most delicate and exalted sentiments. Yet this *brigand* professes, with a calm obstinacy that makes me furious, to be, I will not say an atheist, but a very doubtful believer. I weary myself out in talking to him of the marvels of heaven, earth, and sea, &c. . . . it is a lost labour! He laughs in my face, and my oratorical efforts, my divine enthusiasms, are ignored; "You are mad", he says—and unfortunately he says it in good faith.'

In English the letter to Clarina Maffei may sound sententious and lacking in reticence, but the original bears the stamp of the utmost frankness.

'There is no doubt', she writes, 'that religious belief (not priestcraft) and the Gospel doctrine of grace and charity lead the spirit to regions of great calm and serenity where one finds the strength to walk with rectitude, where, too, one learns forgiveness for sinners and the charity to bring them back to the fold.

'You are a very charitable person in every way—charitable in the moral as well as the material sense. A good counsel in season should rank as charity. Sometimes one finds those who are grateful and show their gratitude. May you enjoy this satisfaction; it is one of the most exquisite pleasures man has on earth.

'Verdi is busy with the grotto and the garden. He is well and in a very good humour. Happy man, may God give him many years of happiness! For some virtuous natures belief in God is a necessity; others, equally perfect, while observing strictly every precept of the highest moral code, are happier believing nothing. Verdi and Manzoni! these two men give me food for thought:—my imperfections and my ignorance, alas, leave me incapable of solving so obscure a problem.'

Manzoni was, of course, the famous writer whose friendship Verdi sought and in whose memory he wrote the *Requiem*. Nothing could exceed the admiration Verdi felt for Manzoni's sterling qualities as a man and a writer; yet Manzoni, like Giuseppina Strepponi, was a believer and Giuseppina cannot understand how two men, equally great in their respective fields, equally high-minded, can differ so radically in their religious outlook.

Giuseppina acted occasionally as Verdi's secretary; and in one of the letters to Giulio Ricordi she describes a domestic scene. Ricordi had evidently asked Verdi to write another opera, which Verdi refused to do. Ricordi then sought the Signora Peppina's help, and she, only too willing that her husband should add to the number of his works, undertook to present to him another and very long letter of Ricordi on the same subject. The conspiracy did not succeed.

'With the best grace in the world I have shown your letter to the cele-

brated composer in question. He read it quite calmly and said: "When you write to Giulio, say that I deeply regret I cannot give him a different answer from that he has already had." I knew it was useless to insist.'

In her letters, in such anecdotes as are remembered and such dialogues as are recorded, Giuseppina seems to have acted not only with affectionate care but also with rare tact. 'It is true to say that all her thoughts', writes E. de Amicis, 'were concentrated on bringing a smile of serenity into Verdi's face, over which a deep passion for art had cast a veil of authority, indeed of sadness, which no praise from the world could lift. In this task she was helped by nature, which had endowed her with a keen sense of humour—rare in women—and the ability to use it gracefully and efficaciously without a single touch of malice or ridicule.'

The musicians' melancholy 'which is fantastical' is a decided handicap in a husband. Verdi was subject to depression from his earliest years but we may question whether his melancholy was the outcome of 'supreme passion for art'. Undoubtedly the men who know the joy of creation are left unarmed against the inevitable reaction, and in the joy itself there is a sting akin to pain. It seems inevitable that, even if a man is surrounded by all the world can give, he should find dissatisfaction when the moment of revelation is past, just as Marlowe's Mephistopheles, having known Paradise, found earth a true hell. Perhaps without some such flaw there is no real temperament, no great power, and that physical weakness—whatever its nature—becomes somehow a source of mental greatness. Beethoven's rude, unsociable manner, Wagner's overbearing, insupportable conceit, Verdi's melancholy, may be, for all we know, the defects of their best qualities. Thus sadness pervades a good deal of Verdi's music. In some arias in *Il Trovatore* Chorley found 'a sweet, affectionate mournfulness which raises them high among examples of their class', and a similar idea is expressed by Alfred Noyes:

"Verdi, Verdi when you wrote *Il Trovatore* did you dream
Of the City when the sun sinks low,
Of the organ and the monkey and the many coloured stream
Of the Piccadilly pavement, of the myriad eyes that seem
To be litten for a moment with a wild Italian gleam
As 'A Che La Morte' parodies the world's eternal theme
And pulses with the sunset-glow?"

Often, when he was urged to write another opera, Verdi would answer: 'Why? What is the use of it?' One would call him pessimist, as, no doubt, he was called in his time, but for his uncanny way of reading the very secret of the events of his time, which fully justified 'pessimism'.[2]

[2] After the 1870 war he wrote: 'The question of Rome does not frighten me nor the astuteness of the priests: it is the strength of the new Goths I fear.' When he came to know the Germans better, he expressed the warmest admiration for their achievements. But the Goths of 1870 became the Huns of 1914, and the history of the intervening years shows that his fears were not ill-founded.

Whenever the darkness descended upon him, Giuseppina was by his side. In his bitterness about the conduct of international affairs, in his disappointment with governments at home,[3] in the worries and cares of performances which fell short of his standard, in great things as in small, Giuseppina Strepponi bore her full share, and her influence was always soothing. One subject alone was never discussed between husband and wife—charity. Verdi, she declared, never measured his charities: 'When we come to make up our accounts, a conspicuous sum is always missing of which Verdi offers no explanation. He has contributed to different charities without considering the total.' For her own part, Giuseppina was equally large-hearted; and only at her death it became known how great a number of people had benefited by her generosity. On occasion husband and wife were associated in an act of charity—as when they learnt that the librettist Piave lay ill in a paupers' hospital. And perhaps we may detect the wife's influence in the letter Verdi wrote to Clarina Maffei concerning another of his librettists—Solera. Highly improvident by nature Solera seems, when in need, to have blamed those of his friends who, if more fortunate, were also more careful. Verdi opens his letter with a characteristic grumble, but ends it by enclosing an anonymous contribution, to start a fund to be subscribed by friends. Incidentally he mentions his opinion of the poor return his librettists had for their labours, going so far as to suggest that original work should be paid for on a royalty basis and thus provide a steady income:

'If you intend to do something for Solera I commend your sympathy but consider it useless; after a week he will be at his old tricks again. I cannot be persuaded that a man with arms, legs, and a head cannot earn his bread honourably. Solera is to blame if his career has not been brilliant and if he is not the best melodramatic poet of our time. It is not right to say that he would not have made much out of it. If he had been in earnest and made himself "indispensable" he could have asked three or four thousand francs for a libretto; he would have also received a royalty on every copy sold wherever the opera was produced. I tried myself some time ago to obtain these terms for poets. I was not successful because the librettos were poor; but if I had submitted a libretto (not patchwork, but original) which would have compelled respect, I could easily have made their fortune . . . I have no reason to be pleased with Solera but if you reply to his appeal with a subscription I enclose a small sum on condition that my name does not appear.

Giuseppina's letters do not give colour to the suggestion that her culture was exceptional. One would rather say of her that, gifted with

[3] 'I do not speak of Reds, Whites, and Blacks . . . I care nothing for form or colour. I read history and find great deeds, great crimes, great virtues in the governments of Kings, Priests, and Republics alike . . . . But I do expect those who look after the public weal to be men of great and sterling honesty. I despair when I see a man as gifted, wise, and upright as Sella derided and insulted—I despair of my country.' Letter to Arrivabene (1881).

quick intelligence, she assimilated a good deal, and that little of what passed in her life and travels escaped her observation. She had already made a name as a singer when her intimacy with Verdi began. Though she gave up the theatre without regret, yet she was woman enough to resent the remarks of people who affected to ignore that she had been a famous singer or reference to her advancing age. She was annoyed when some strangers (who did not know him) pointing to her husband said: 'What a fine old man!' 'Old? He is younger than any of you', she exclaimed indignantly.

It is unfortunate that more of her letters are not available, for of the couples remembered in history this is not the least remarkable. The existing portraits of Giuseppina Strepponi show a pretty oval face and a half pathetic, half whimsical expression, a contrast to the serious, thoughtful air of Verdi's portraits. But just as Verdi could on occasion unbend and be merry, so there was a strain of reflectiveness in her character which her few intimate friends probably discovered sooner than her husband.

Giuseppina's admiration for her husband never waned; she gloried in his success and interpreted her part in his life as that of a helper and a chronicler. In the letters quoted by Monaldi the burden of every communication is Verdi or his work. One letter has five paragraphs and in every one of them Verdi's name occurs: how she met him at Alseno; how she gave him Ricordi's message; how she spoke to him about *Don Carlo;* how Verdi was 'earning his daily bread' as foreman at Sant' Agata; how she read to him a passage that concerned him. In 1869 they were boating on the lake of Sant' Agata when the boat overturned and both fell into fairly deep water.

'I had no time for fear', she wrote, 'because losing one's balance and finding 6 feet of water above one does not take a moment. I was just about to faint when, opening my eyes, I saw Verdi holding me, up to his neck in water. I thought he had jumped in to save me. Only later I learned what had actually happened, and then I was terrified at the thought of the consequences that the involuntary bath might have had for him and his art. As for me, I am nobody. . . .'

At times she reflects Verdi's thought like a mirror and in her description of the dress rehearsal of *Aïda* in Paris one can almost hear Verdi's own criticism:

'The performance was excellent on the part of the orchestra, even though some of the strings were poor, the harps sounded like guitars, and the timpani were very weak. The chorus, less satisfactory, has not much tone. On the other hand there is a complete lack of discipline—an aftermath of the Commune. You know the principals already and what they can do . . . . The dresses are designed in gold; there is so much gold that the old clerks of the Italian Theatre do not say "Aïda", Verdi,

Escudier; but Aïdor", Verd-or, and Escudi-or. The *mise en scène* will be effective with a certain class of public; those who are not blinded by the "clinquant" and who condemn want of historical accuracy will like it less; the scenery . . . is pretentious and not effective, the machinery complicated, ill-understood, ill-directed. It takes long to set the scenes and the *entr'actes* become interminable . . . . Fortunately it looks as if the music had made a deep impression; and that, coupled with the splendid performance of the singers, will atone for everything.'

In merging herself completely into her husband's life she found her joy and her vocation. But it was a joy to which were attached not a few responsibilities. No woman has ever found it easy to be the wife of a man of genius; and Verdi had, besides musical genius, a strange love of the minutiae of domestic routine, of meticulously balanced accounts, of order and neatness. He detested public demonstrations and public honours, to which women are said to be attracted. 'It is really surprising'—writes Monaldi—'that in a man of so lively and impetuous an imagination there should be also so keen a practical sense. This Verdi applied to life as well as to art, to the theatre no less than to the house. While he recoiled from anything meant to advertise his operas, he showed the keenest interest in the impresario's profits.'

This must have been more satisfactory to the impresario than to the housekeeper.

The reflected glamour of being a great man's wife may be a powerful balm. If Giuseppina Strepponi ever thought with a touch of wistfulness of the days when she was free, of applause won in the theatre, and of a lost career, she never uttered a complaint.

7

From 'Il Trovatore' to 'I Vespri Siciliani'

THE subject of *Il Trovatore*, derived from a popular Spanish play by Garcia Gutierrez, first attracted Verdi in 1850, but was then set aside. Later Cammarano was persuaded to take it in hand and make a scenario which did not satisfy Verdi. Under the impression that Cammarano had no liking for the subject, Verdi then suggested another story; it is a great pity Cammarano did not fall in with the suggestion and discard the worst plot ever used in opera. The story is neither absurd nor illogical. If it were only absurd, music might raise it to a plane where the rational is not the first consideration. But, if we cannot expect logic in a work of fiction, we may at least demand that the events should be put before us with some suggestion of verisimilitude. In *Il Trovatore* there are too many incidents, too many plots and counterplots for any one of them to appear clear and convincing; crowded together, they overshadow each other. There is Azucena's love for her adopted son Manrico and Manrico's love for Leonora; Azucena's hatred of the Count and the rivalry between the Count and Manrico. Leonora is a wanderer who at first resides in a castle, retires later to a convent, then is rescued by Manrico, married to Manrico, and finally dies of poison. Rival forces contend for fortified castles which change hands with great rapidity. The casualties are severe. Apart from the rank and file who perish when Manrico wins, and again when he loses the castle, all the principal actors die a violent death: Leonora commits suicide, Azucena is burnt at the stake, Manrico slain by the headsman; and the Count, after sending his brother to the block and bringing about his mistress's death, must as a matter of course somehow put an end to his days. But lest these horrors should not suffice, there is the gruesome incident of the burnt child—the subject of the prologue and of Azucena's tale. It is not surprising that Cammarano found it strong meat.

At the same time we can see what attracted Verdi. His first objection to Cammarano's scenario was that the two sentiments which sway Azucena were not portrayed as powerfully as in the original. He saw in contrasting passions one motif; in the development an opportunity for strong, dramatic music of the kind he knew he could write well and quickly. He failed to visualize the confusion that must inevitably ensue when many incidents, first reduced to the bare bones and then magnified by music, follow in rapid succession and from one place to another:

castle to encampment, encampment to convent, convent to castle, and so on. Unity of place is not essential; but there is danger when one act or scene covers too many miles in the course of a single action.

His mother's death in June prevented Verdi from proceeding with the composition of *Il Trovatore* at once. But in September he wrote again to Cammarano, urging him to set to work and send the libretto at the earliest possible moment. The text was probably finished in October; the first production took place in Rome in the following January, the performance satisfying the exacting composer and delighting the audience, which proclaimed it a masterpiece. And perhaps—of its kind—it is a masterpiece. Melodrama, of course; more conventional as regards musical texture than *Rigoletto*, but redeemed by the splendid sincerity which keeps it alive when such better operas as *Un Ballo in Maschera* and *La Forza del Destino* are neglected. There is besides in *Il Trovatore* something which captures the popular mind—something more than the tenor aria of the last act, the 'Miserere', and the thrilling horrors of Azucena's story. It has contrasts, forceful and elemental, reaching beyond ordinary limits and pervading the music as deeply as the drama, to which they impart a rude picturesqueness stimulating to men not endowed with a quick imagination. The robust appetite does not demur at homely fare, and accepts in *Il Trovatore* the faults as well as the merits of 'popular' opera. If its essence is a rough romanticism, a love of impossible heroisms, of passionate attachments and persecutions, of quasi-regal state and violent actions; if it stands for unsophisticated imagination and excess of sentiment, yet it is endeared to us too by its pity, elementary yet generous, to which the public at large inevitably respond. In *Il Trovatore* the appeal is to the masses. The composer does not pander to public taste, nor does he set out deliberately to please the majority: yet he expresses the ideals of the people with a sureness of touch and genius for effect as easily noticeable as in the more aristocratic art of *Falstaff*. Nothing in *Il Trovatore* detains the student, for its technique is of the simplest; yet everything shows a determination to make the fullest use of melodies which flow with incomparable force and ease.

The style is a compromise and a source of great difficulty to performers. Cadenzas abound, impetuous cabalettas break forth into flourishes of virtuosity; arias of great sweetness alternate with vehement allegros, and nothing in the texture of the music helps to cover imperfection in the performer. In Verdi's time singers claimed to be the arbiters of opera. *Il Trovatore* gave them the opportunity to prove their claims.

The next opera, performed at Venice less than two months after *Il Trovatore*, is pathetic rather than dramatic in character. The subject was derived from the novel by A. Dumas (fils), *La Dame aux Camélias*. Verdi saw a play adapted from the novel in Paris at the end of 1852. On

his return to Italy he asked Piave to make a libretto of it. On March 6, 1853, *La Traviata* was produced.

The failure of the first performance has been generally ascribed to the incapacity of the singers. Verdi himself is not certain whether to attribute it to them or to some quality in the music. To Muzio he wrote: 'Last night *Traviata* was a fiasco. Is the fault mine or the singers'? Time will decide.' To Ricordi: 'I am sorry to have to send you a sad piece of news, but I cannot hide the truth from you. *Traviata* has proved a failure. Do not let us look for the cause. The facts are plain enough.' And to Luccardi: 'I am writing not after the first, but after the second performance of *Traviata*. The result has been a decided fiasco. I do not know whose fault it is—better to say nothing about it. I will not discuss the music, and with your permission I will remain silent as to the performance.'

The idea that the execution was badly at fault may be rejected, partly because it is not proven, partly because we know with what meticulous care Verdi chose his interpreters and how thoroughly he rehearsed them. Rumour tells that the baritone sang the aria of the second act 'Di Provenza il mare, il suol' carelessly; even if this were true it could hardly account alone for the failure of the whole opera. More interesting is the report that when in the fourth act the physician was heard to say that Violetta will die of consumption in a few hours, the public, impressed by the robust proportions of the singer, laughed in derision. The incident implies that the audience had lost the illusion which alone makes a dramatic performance possible. Singers and actors cannot always be cast to type, but the public usually accepts the inevitable and does not reject a Violetta or Mimi who is anything but thin and emaciated, any more than it cavils at a thin actor wishing that his 'too, too solid flesh would melt'. The theatre consists of make-believe but also stimulates the imagination. It is the business of the dramatist or the composer to reconcile us to the conventions. Failure may result either by less than efficient artistry or by an overdose of conventional elements. Had Verdi failed in skill as a composer, or had he not seen that *Traviata* exceeded a reasonable measure of convention?

The tone of easy banter in which he describes the event suggests that his mind at least was not disturbed and his artistic conscience clear. In spite of the verdict of the Venetians he was confident that time would prove, as it has done, that *Traviata* is not inferior to *Trovatore*. On the other hand he was well aware before the performance that the drama he had chosen was unusual in character and that the public would have to accept yet another convention. 'I am composing for Venice'—he wrote —' "La Dame aux Camélias" which will perhaps be called "La Traviata". It is a story of the present day. Another composer probably would not have touched it on account of the costumes, or the time, or other

absurd scruples: but I find the greatest pleasure in writing it. Everybody scoffed when I proposed to put a hunchback on the stage. Well I was confident enough writing *Rigoletto*.'

But for once his knowledge of the public and his instinct for the theatre played him false. He underrated the rooted objection of the public for modern costume in opera; and it is highly probable that it was this innovation in *Traviata* which sealed its fate on the first performance and prevented the public, unprepared for the experiment, from listening to it with an open mind. Other—and perhaps worse—conventions they were prepared to accept and, no doubt, had accepted many times before. The new convention turned the scales. To confirm this view there is the parallel case of Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*, which because of the modern costume was a failure at the first performance, but which was successfully revived months later when the audience knew what to expect.

There is really no sound reason for it, but instinct suggests that it is wise to avoid our own world and our own time in opera. We bestow decorations—not music—on distinguished contemporaries who in good time may deserve both. But before their deeds and passions can be treated in opera without shock it is well to wait until we have forgotten that they, like ourselves, had grosser instincts, that in some regards they were remarkably like the rest of us. We do not care who La Dame au Camélias is, or whether she be fat or lean. But she must not be somebody we know too well, she must not be our own neighbour.

While a not infallible performance contributed perhaps to the ill success, the primary cause should be sought in an audience put out of humour by an unexpected addition to the load of conventions. The Venetian verdict was reversed in May 1854, when a forewarned public was prepared to accept the costumes—if the music was found to deserve it.

The libretto of *La Traviata*—apart from the story—is far more logical than that of *Il Trovatore*. The plot runs fairly smoothly; there are no serious gaps in the chain of episodes, but there is one bad example of overcrowded incidents which impede the action and make it exceedingly difficult for the spectator to know what exactly is happening on the stage. The librettist has to tell the spectator that Violetta and Alfredo have been lovers for some months: that they are very happy in a villa not far from Paris. As neither has given a thought to financial affairs, Violetta, rather than accept assistance from Alfredo, sends her maid secretly to Paris to sell horses, carriages, and what else remains of her establishment. The purpose of this unnecessary scene is to show the independence and generosity of Violetta's nature. Its inclusion would be justified only if every detail were made clear. As it is, the spectator learns the story by means of dialogues with the servants; from servants who go to and return from Paris as quickly as others go from one room to another;

and from letters which are never read in full. A 'business man' writes to Violetta about her Paris establishment; a friend, Flora, writes to invite Violetta to a party; old Germont has written to Alfredo; Violetta writes a letter to Flora and another to Alfredo. All these affairs together with Alfredo's purposeless aria and his flying excursion to Paris 'to avenge the insult' (the insult provides the theme of the cabaletta but is unexplained) only serve to bewilder the spectator.

Besides dramatic weakness there is a practical reason (important from the composer's point of view) why small parts such as those of servants should not be multiplied. They are usually assigned to a member of the chorus whose voice, either too thin or too rough, is not an advantage to a solo, and whose wooden gestures invite ridicule.

With all its faults the libretto had the immense merit of setting Verdi's imagination on fire. The whole standard is higher than in *Trovatore*. The scene of riotous gaiety which opens the opera is handled less casually than the similar scene in *Rigoletto*. When we pass from the preparatory stages to the crisis of the drama, Verdi's melody acquires a pathos and eloquence far greater than any he himself or any other Italian composer had ever revealed before. The music, essentially melodic, is entirely at the mercy of the singers, and there are few to-day who can divine—far less present to us—all that it contains. In *Traviata* the popular art of the early operas, as distinguished from the more complex style of the later work, reaches its climax.

The popularity of *Traviata* has been its bane. These melodies, in passing from mouth to mouth, have lost their freshness, their nervous energy, and have become stale and placid; their slender growth has been trampled down by the mass. Let us glance for a moment at the few bars in which Violetta decides to fall in with Germont's wishes, to sacrifice her love and, as she believes, her life. It is only some sixteen bars, harmonized in the simplest way, a *cantabile* in which the melody rises from one degree of the scale to the next. Examined with the cold eye of the technician it has nothing to arrest the attention; it seems formal, conventional, if not meaningless. Yet those who heard it interpreted by Gemma Bellincioni could hardly help seeing in those few strokes the perfect picture of mortal anguish.

In *Traviata* the psychology of Verdi's music, no longer shackled by formality, begins to be articulate. The best act—the second—disposes of an aria at the beginning in an off-hand manner; then there is another for Germont père—more interesting than the first, yet completely dwarfed by Violetta's music—which, neither aria nor cabaletta, is rather a succession of tender or passionate phrases of a few bars' length, poignant and beautiful. The evolution of Verdi towards finer forms and more aristocratic expression becomes already evident. The arias of *Traviata* are as good as any found in other operas by Verdi. But arias

no longer sufficed or satisfied his dramatic instinct. No drama could move swiftly with so clumsy a form forced on it by custom. Verdi, without being actually conscious of it, impelled only by a sane, healthy instinct, was leaving tradition behind and discovering his own vehicle of expression. It was not on musical grounds, however, that *Traviata* was supposed to be an innovation. Those who did not like Verdi's music perceived only the usual vehemence which they found, as in Wagner's operas, modern and disturbing. The arias both placated and hoodwinked the old admirers. It was the subject that some found objectionable—amongst them Chorley, who based his objections on moral, musical, and dramatic grounds.

The moral issue fortunately does not concern us. It is for the philosopher to discriminate between truth and error, and to determine whether those are right who maintain that Marguerite Gauthier deserves our sympathy, or those who hold that youth—imitative, impulsive, an easy prey to sentiment or sentimentality—should not be encouraged to pity a courtesan. Our only concern is to establish the fact that Verdi was moved by compassion for a character typical of the romanticism which gave us Fantine as well as 'Cromwell'. He was, as we have said, so struck by the play that he made light of the difficulties he foresaw. That there should also be moral objections never occurred to him at all.

From the musical point of view Chorley thought the story inadmissible. 'Consumption for one who is to sing!' he exclaims. 'A ballet with a lame sylphide would be as rational.' This is surely irrelevant. If we accept music as a means of dramatic expression, it follows that all the dramatis personae must express themselves in song, whether in sickness or in health. The last act Chorley found 'repulsive', and there is the gravamen of the charge; the scene is moving; but repellent to those who dislike realism on the stage. If he had said simply: ' "La Dame aux Camélias" is bad art because of its rude assault on our emotions, and Verdi was at fault in setting it to music', many might have agreed with him.

In every age there have been apostles and opponents of realism—a side issue in the eternal conflict between romanticism and classicism, between the unfettered flight of fancy on the one hand and the passion for pure, seemly form on the other. The objection to a romantic story like those of *Traviata* or *Manon* springs from the same source as the objection to a religious theme—both have their root in the belief that the opera house is a place of entertainment where any theme likely to touch the conscience is out of place. It is a question not so much of taste as of instinct. It means a refusal to contemplate the terrible, the tragic, the horrible, except in connexion with a moral lesson. People who do not demur to the story of the Magdalene take exception to a play on Marguerite Gauthier. If they dared apply to literature the standards they

apply to music they might accept *Hamlet* and perhaps *Macbeth*, but a ban would be placed on *Othello* or *Lear* ('more terrible than *Macbeth*, more piteous than *Othello*'). If Chorley found the death scene repulsive, others since have found it too sweet and melodious. No doubt music has gone far since *Traviata*, and composers can now portray a death scene with a realism undreamt of by Verdi and his contemporaries.

A longer period of time than usual was allowed to pass between the production of *La Traviata* and its successor *I Vespri Siciliani*. Yet this opera does not mark any advance of style or technique. Perhaps the reason for the return to old forms may be found in the unusual circumstances under which the opera was written.

The French Government conceived the idea of celebrating the Great Exhibition of 1855 by commissioning musical compositions. Berlioz wrote his Te Deum for the opening ceremony and a cantata for the close. Perhaps in order to emphasize the 'universal' character of the exhibition, Verdi was asked to write an opera on a French libretto by Scribe. The plan was unwise. The French resented what they conceived to be a slight on their own composers, while the Italians saw in the offer nothing but political intrigue. There was—as it happened—a good deal of intrigue, but it had no connexion with politics.

Scribe kept Verdi waiting, and there is a letter dated August 17, 1853, complaining that although a year had gone by since the contract was signed, there was no news of Scribe and his libretto. Verdi received the text on the last day of December. The following October he was in Paris, beginning the rehearsals. Difficulties arose almost at once. Cruvelli, a German singer, who was then at the Opera, failed to appear at rehearsal. Messengers sent to look for her could not find her; her disappearance made such a sensation that in London a one-act comedy entitled 'Where's Cruvelli?' was written and performed at the Strand Theatre. Verdi found difficulties all round. Believing that there was no time to train another soprano, he asked to be released from the engagement. The situation was saved by the return of Cruvelli, who resumed her part with perfect composure, and the rehearsals proceeded as before. But there were other reasons for dissatisfaction, as a letter to the Director of the Opera, Crosnier, reveals. Verdi complains that Scribe neither attended the rehearsals nor took any notice of his suggestions for much needed changes, and moreover that something in the text was offensive to an Italian: 'He has wounded the French', writes Verdi, 'and he has wounded Italian *amour propre* by making Giovanni da Procida into a common conspirator with the inevitable dagger in hand.' The more sophisticated Scribe perhaps thought that having wounded the French by a title which hurt national pride, and insulted the Italians by his drawing of Da Procida, the honours were even. But downright, plain-speaking Verdi would have none of it. 'In the history of every nation,' he continues,

'there are virtues and crimes, and we Italians are no worse than other nations. In any case I am an Italian, and I will never be a party to an insult to my country.'

Another cause of grievance was the attitude of some of the performers during the rehearsals, which took place in the foyer: 'Perhaps some people find my music unworthy of the Opera: perhaps others find it unworthy of their talent: it is even possible that I in my turn find the performance and methods of singing very different from what I could wish. . . .' Believing that success in such circumstances was remote, he again requested a release from his engagement.

Apparently no notice of the letter was taken for some days. On receiving the usual summons to rehearsal Verdi again wrote to Crosnier declaring that he would not attend unless all obstacles were removed, and again asked to be released from the contract should it be found impossible to comply with his suggestions.

In March rumours spread of a new disagreement between Verdi and Scribe, but this Verdi denied in a letter to *L'Europe Artiste*, and at length all differences were composed.

I Vespri Siciliani was produced on June 13 and, at first, well received. But the work did not long hold its place in the repertory. The French resented a title which recalled an unpleasant page in history; its music was not of the kind to overrule scruples and objections. Verdi seems to have tried to give the Parisians what he thought they wanted and to please them rather than himself. The outcome is a medley of styles and *I Vespri* is the least Verdian, the least characteristic of his operas. The problem of having to write music to a foreign text may also have influenced his style adversely.

While Verdi was in Paris it was rumoured in Italy that he meant to follow the example of Rossini and make the French capital his home. Clarina Maffei wrote to inquire whether there was any truth in the suggestion and Verdi answered in a very characteristic letter:

'Take root here? Impossible! . . . For what purpose—glory? I do not believe in it. Wealth? I earn as much and perhaps more in Italy; I repeat, it is impossible. I love too dearly our own plains and the Italian sky. I raise my hat to no count, marquis, or to anyone else. Besides I am not a millionaire, and the few thousand francs I have made by my labour shall never be expended in advertising, on claque, or on any other despicable purpose, which appears necessary here if one is to succeed. A few days ago Dumas himself said of Meyerbeer's new opera [the spelling is Verdi's]: "Quel malheur che Rossini n'ait pas donné ses chef-d'œuvres en 1854! Il est vrai de dire aussi que Rossini n'a jamais eu cette vivacité allemande qui sait faire bouillir six mois à l'avance un succés dans la chaudière des fourneaux et prepare aussi l'explosion d'intelligence du premier soir." All this is quite true. I was present myself at the first performance of this *Etoile du Nord* and could make little

or nothing of it; but the public here understood it all and found it beautiful, sublime, divine! . . . The same public cannot take in *William Tell* after 25 or 30 years and the opera has to be crippled, mutilated, reduced to three acts instead of five, and produced with an utterly unworthy *mise en scène* . . . and this is the greatest theatre in the world.'

In Italy the new opera was bound to raise opposition from the many censors whose business it was to prevent Italians from giving their mind to politics. Their objections were met by changing the title *I Vespri Siciliani*, first to 'Giovanna di Braganza' and then to 'Giovanna di Guzman' and by other radical changes, so that Verdi compared the revised text to a sieve full of holes. The opera had no great success, but some critics have expressed the opinion that it deserved a better fate.

Verdi was now in one of the few happy seasons of his life. He had won something he prized more highly than fame or wealth—independence. Recognition was of course a first necessity, and even independence without it would have lost its sweetness. The fear of mediocrity might have haunted one who believed that such luxuries as art have no place for anything but the best.[4] His position, however, was now secure and he could return, after supervising a first performance at Milan or Paris, to the quiet life of Sant' Agata. When in residence there he would often go on market days to Busseto, to bargain with farmers and attend to the sale of the stock he reared, of which he was very proud. Wherever he went abroad—Paris, Milan, or Naples—his house was never forgotten, nor were his dependants. He writes from Paris to his caretaker: 'You say nothing of the servants . . . are they all dead? How is the groom? What is he doing? Is it true that Carlo [the old coachman] is dead? These are to me important matters and I must be kept informed. . . . As soon as you receive this letter please write and answer all my questions.' Here is another letter from Paris: 'I gather that you do not give Milord [a horse] enough exercise and that you haven't yet broken in the foal. This will not do: horses will not keep fit and will get fat and lazy if they are not exercised. And—I insist—the horses must be fed on our own hay.'

He gives minute and peremptory directions for every job to be done and grows impatient when his orders are not obeyed to the letter:

'I leave for Paris' (he writes from Turin) 'to-morrow. For a second time, these are my instructions; I intend to find out whether I can be understood and obeyed or not. I am not joking; I have every intention of remaining master of my own house.'

[4] 'The artist has not even the excuse of necessity which may serve a lawyer or a physician. With these men the fact that they are indispensable may be an excuse for their existence. Not so in art. Of all the arts, moreover, music is the one which can be the most annoying : its basis is sound, and unpleasant sounds are vexing . . . one can throw away a volume of verses and turn one's eyes from a picture or a statue: one cannot escape music.' (Monaldi, *Verdi nella vita e nell' arte*).

There is a very characteristic letter addressed to the conductor Mariani who was to join him in a shooting expedition. After giving him various commissions he begins:

'Bring all your gear with you: it will pass as luggage on the train. Book as far as Piacenza; there take another ticket to Borgo. You will have to leave by the 10 a.m. train arriving at Piacenza at about three: then there is half an hour's wait, and you will get to Borgo after four. There you will find a coach for Busseto, but as it has to wait for the train from Parma, it is always late in leaving Borgo. If you have to wait for the coach, have lunch at Borgo; or hire a cab to take you to Sant' Agata. Better still, write to me the day before and I will send my carriage to meet you at Borgo.'

The same passion for clearness, for avoiding ambiguity is found no less in the homeliest letter than in his scores.

8

From 'Simon Boccanegra' to 'Un Ballo in Maschera'

VERDI'S music has been divided, like that of Wagner and Beethoven, into periods—early, middle and late. It is a procedure useful enough with some composers, but absurd when applied to Verdi, whose temperament and characteristics are seen almost as clearly in the first as in the last operas. If we must differentiate, it is more helpful to draw a distinction between those works in which the lyric instinct rules unchecked and those in which it is restrained; between the operas where imagination and senses are stimulated mainly by a gracious or passionate melody, and those which rely for their effect on a more thoughtful and judicious disposition of the composer's gifts and means.

The dividing line is not easy to draw, and can be accepted only as a more fruitful basis for discussion than the question of style. It is obvious that in any good opera (as in any good symphony) both instinct and reflection play their part. But in most of Verdi's early operas the predominant intention is very clearly lyrical; the composer, in the grip of an inspired idea, does not pause too long to question its value or the attractiveness of its presentation.

Simon Boccanegra is, like *Macbeth*, one of the operas in which the composer tried to control his instinct and to make it the helpmate of reason. It was given for the first time at Venice in 1857; but of this first version, apparently nothing is left. The edition we now possess is the outcome of a drastic revision undertaken by Verdi for the Milan performance of 1881. It is said that he never bestowed so much care on the orchestration of a work as on the score of the first *Boccanegra*. But the critic who repeats this assertion laments later that the second act was not subjected to as thorough a revision as the others, and that it still betrays weaknesses of style. The 1881 edition alone will be considered here; for the opera, even in the revised form, cannot claim precedence over *Un Ballo in Maschera*, the much more homogeneous work that Verdi wrote after *Boccanegra*. Piave wrote the libretto of *Boccanegra* which was derived from a Spanish drama by Gutierrez, the begetter of *Trovatore*, and was later retouched by Boito at Verdi's request. Even Boito's skill could not compass the task of uniting the far-flung episodes of *Boccanegra*. The action is based on so many intrigues and deceptions that in the end the spectator ceases to care whether the puzzle is solved or not. It would be

presumptuous to put forward any connected tale as a possible translation of Piave's nonsense. His failure can only be explained by the supposition that when he began to write he had no more clear notion of the shape the development was to take than he had of its ending. All that emerges clearly from amongst the flotsam and jetsam of plots and counter-plots is that a Genoese nobleman, Gabriele Adorno, is in love with the daughter of his political rival, the Doge, Simon Boccanegra. The love-knot is too delicate and slender to hold together a story in which the people revolt against the government of noblemen; the republic is prevented from making war on Venice by Boccanegra's passionate pleading for peace; the peasant who first chooses the doge, twenty-five years later, thwarted in love, turns traitor and would murder him. It is a story which at times recalls the method of the historical play, at times vies with *Il Trovatore* in wildly extravagant romanticism, and at others degenerates into a medley of mistaken identities.

It may seem strange that so experienced a man of the theatre as Verdi should have accepted this tangled skein. But first and foremost a musician, he was apt to be led astray by the special interest of some scene and their aptitude for his music. The story of *Boccanegra* is bad, but it possesses two or three scenes that called forth the best that was in Verdi. So powerful, so irresistible was this appeal that he determined to set them to music—without considering the plot as a whole. He had been urged to regard music which illustrated a patriotic theme as the highest form of art; *Boccanegra* gave him his chance to attack on the stage the rivalry between Italian cities which had primarily caused his country's servitude. He had seen good stories like those of *Rigoletto* and *Traviata* attacked, and a bad libretto like that of *Trovatore* accepted without demur. He probably hoped for a similar fate for *Boccanegra*. For once he was mistaken: even the second edition failed to retrieve the opera's fortunes. There are better things in the first and third acts of *Boccanegra* than any in *Trovatore*. But the opera is not only gloomy, it is irrational. The characters remain alien to us, together with their motives and purpose; explanations are withheld which might have cleared the situation simply and swiftly. Verdi and Piave no doubt knew what happened before the mysterious prologue begins; the spectator is in ignorance and remains in ignorance till the last scene—when he no longer remembers or cares about events that happened long before.

Some writers have tried to prove that Verdi was a man of vast knowledge and education. Now knowledge can easily be acquired at any time; but not so the art to use knowledge. Verdi had knowledge and instinct—not education. Had he had the advantage of a literary training he could never have accepted such librettos as *Trovatore* or *Boccanegra*. In *Trovatore* we see the effects of romanticism on a mind powerful and responsive but untrained, and therefore apt to err in judging of facts and words.

His is the romanticism of the masses, ever ready to listen to a tale of adventure, no matter how improbable; awed by the supernatural, by mystery, by the glamour of valour and power; instinct with passions that are robust, if somewhat primitive. From such raw material great stories are spun. But Verdi was like the young who ignore inevitable limitations; anxious to do too much, to cover too much ground, to grasp everything within reach, to include under a single scheme every idea likely to stir his creative instinct, without making allowances for the effect of the expansion that inevitably follows whenever music is added to words. The confusion in *Trovatore* and *Boccanegra* can be traced directly to the interpolation of counter-plots which, in the end, completely obscure the main issue. In *Trovatore* the gipsy who changes the children of Count di Luna adds a problem—explained only at the very end—which complicates the rivalry of the two brothers. In *Boccanegra* the Genoese nobleman, Jacopo Fiesco, adds an unnecessary obstacle to a plot that abounds in intrigues and mistaken personalities. The central theme whose function it is to bind together the whole action is lost in a maze of less important episodes. Is the hero, Boccanegra, to be admired because he defies single-handed both noblemen and people? Or is he paying in remorse the penalty for having seduced Fiesco's daughter? Is he to be pitied because he is surrounded by enemies? Should we praise his magnanimity in pardoning the enemies of both the doge and the republic? There is no answer to these questions, no limit to the magnanimity of Boccanegra, as there is no limit to the cruelty of the Count di Luna in *Trovatore*.

The most common causes of weakness in the early operas are the narrow and conventional harmonic texture and the construction of the libretto. Verdi himself with characteristic modesty admits the limitations of his harmonic scheme when he speaks of the chord of the diminished seventh as 'the rock and refuge of us all who cannot write four bars without the help of a dozen such chords'. And although he did enliven the harmonic play with strokes of great felicity, all the operas which preceded *Aïda* contain occasional examples of threadbare, undistinguished harmony.

The librettos are often inspired either by a patriotic motive or by a primitive romanticism, an innate longing for glamour and fiction as a revolt against stark, barren realism, or an instinct for a better order in human affairs. Their weakness is not so much in the absence of strictly logical development, which is more essential to drama than the opera. Failure is frequently due to discrepancy of aims and means; a common cause being the crowding of incident upon incident; and even more obvious, in certain librettos, is the weakness of the 'lines of communications' which should join together the various stages in the development of the action.

Verdi must shoulder part of the blame for some of these failings. He is at least responsible for the interpolation of the council scene in *Boccanegra*, the revision of which is discussed in a letter to Giulio Ricordi (1880). He believed that the second act should bring some relief from the dark atmosphere of the drama, and after rejecting the suggestion of a festive celebration as commonplace, and another of an expedition to Africa, he decided on war against Pisa or Venice. 'This reminds me of two magnificent letters from Petrarch to the Doges of Genoa and Venice warning them that they, children of the same motherland, were entering upon a fratricidal war. What an idea to come from the age of Petrarch! It is political, and not dramatic; but an ingenious writer may well turn it to account. For instance, Boccanegra, struck by Petrarch's idea, accepts the poet's advice and calls together the Councillors of State, telling them of the letter and of his feelings on the subject. They are all horrified and in their anger accuse him of being a traitor to the national cause.'

This scene, as described by Verdi is found in the 1881 edition—it is, in fact, the most powerful scene of the opera. Verdi not only read it, but 'heard' it. It is a conception worthy of a dramatist, who with his mind's eye sees at once the whole scene. But it brings a new element into a very complicated story and, instead of speeding, hinders the action. Nor does the scene relieve the heavy gloom of the play as Verdi hoped it would. The public can stand horror if reason can be shown for it, but revolts at the presentation of tragic events without purpose or explanation. Here lies the weakness of *Boccanegra*. Verdi, while he loved it as parents love their weakest offspring, was not without misgivings. When he had completed the revision he expressed the hope that 'the broken legs of this old Boccanegra had been well put together',[5] adding a few days later that 'the play is very sad . . . because it cannot help it, but it is interesting as well. . . . As for its future career . . . we shall see and in the meantime we can only hope'.

In the same year (1857) another opera saw the light, to live but a short while. *Aroldo* consists mainly of the revised music of *Stiffelio* fitted to a new libretto. It contains nothing that Verdi has not said better elsewhere.

From *Un Ballo in Maschera* it would seem that the composer had himself followed the advice he gave to students to practise fugue 'constantly, tenaciously'. There are no fugues in the opera, but the texture is often contrapuntal and consequently more solid. When he writes a counterpoint it is to fulfil a definite dramatic purpose, not simply to 'fill in'. There are no leading themes in the Wagnerian sense, but a theme assigned to the conspirators is heard whenever they appear on the scene. Musical themes are also subjected to some development. Some of the most inspired pages are still based on a harmonic scheme of the utmost

[5] Letter to Arrivabene, March 25, 1881.

simplicity; like a wise man, Verdi forbore to interfere with a song that, he felt, came directly from the source of all great things. There is also greater distinction in the music of the page, Oscar, and in the music of the ball scene—incomparably superior to anything Verdi had done before. The tenor song, 'E scherzo od è follia', testifies to a lightness of touch one would never expect in the author of *Boccanegra;* its melody laughs and chuckles. The chorus which concludes the second act ('Ve'se di notte') is another happy example of this new serio-comic expression.

Apart from this *Un Ballo in Maschera* resembles other operas, with this important proviso, that although the general characteristics of the music are the same the style is riper. There are arias, but they are no longer followed by cabalettas; and often take the place in the opera which soliloquy has in drama. Verdi may have written as pathetic a melody as that which is found in 'Eri tu' but he had never before shown such range of expression. Indeed every character in the play begins to interest us as a medium for Verdi's music quite apart from its dramatic value. In spite of the clumsy words of the libretto, the characterization of *Un Ballo in Maschera* is, musically, as efficient and effective as in *Rigoletto* or *Traviata.* The cumulative effect is not the same because the librettist (Antonio Somma)—aided by various political censors—did his best to make nonsense of the story of Scribe's *Gustave III* from which the libretto was drawn.

Somma wrote lines so foolish that they have since become bywords. We owe him, however, a debt of gratitude. Even the long-suffering Italian public revolted against such gross ineptitude, and the improvement in the general standard of texts for operas dates from this production. This, however, must be said for Somma. He felt certain of the censor's approval only when he wrote nonsense.

The political censors were more than usually thorough with "Un Ballo". The story deals with the king of Sweden, Gustav III, who was murdered during a ball at Stockholm. The Swedish capital is far enough from Naples (where the opera was to have been given during the carnival season of 1858), but the word regicide disturbed King Ferdinand and his court, and they determined to put every obstacle in the way of its production. Verdi, who had received the text of the first act in November 1857, went to Naples in the following January to begin rehearsing. He was fully aware that Scribe's play (which had been produced in Paris with incidental music by Auber) would alarm the censors as *Rigoletto* had done before. But he was not prepared for the drastic revisions of the Neapolitan censor. An attempt was made to induce Verdi to visit the king, possibly with the object of showing the world that though his musical genius had an unfortunate bias for political situations, he himself had no political views and was ready to accept the patronage of such a king as Ferdinand. But Verdi refused to shake hands with the Bourbon

ruler; the difficulties multiplied, and it was then that he was hailed: 'Viva Verdi!' by those who meant '*Viva V*ittorio *E*manuele *R*e *D'I*talia'. The carnival passed in vain attempts to reconcile irreconcilables; and when the season ended without a performance, the management brought an action against Verdi for failure to deliver a suitable opera according to the terms of the contract. Verdi on his part brought an action against the management which had failed to produce the opera he had given them. He accused the authorities of the theatre of having suppressed the author's name, of having changed the title of the opera, of having turned a romantic and chivalrous hero into a meaningless, frigid nonentity and a young page into an old soldier. He further alleged that in the original the heroine was a woman torn by conflicting passions—by her love for the monarch on the one hand, on the other by her duty to her husband; in the censored version this motive had disappeared and with it the conflict which was her dramatic *raison d'être*. A sea-song which the tenor sings in the second act (masquerading as a sailor) was retained, but the censors insisted that the costume worn by the singer should be that of a hunter. Finally, while the time of the action was the seventeenth century in the original, the censor refused to allow the play to be given unless the time was put back to the fourteenth century—'the one an age of gallantry and chivalry', comments Verdi, 'the other an age of iron'.

Un Ballo in Maschera was the third title found for the opera, the first being 'Gustavo III', the second 'Una Vendetta in Domino'. A fourth was suggested by the Neapolitan censor, 'Amelia degli Adimari'.

The Neapolitan public was so completely on Verdi's side that the government was forced to capitulate; the action against him was withdrawn, and he was allowed to leave Naples on condition that he returned to produce a new opera the following year.

Meanwhile the impresario of the theatre at Rome, Jacovacci, proposed to Verdi that he should give the first performance of *Un Ballo* in Rome, trusting to his friendship with the authorities to overcome the objection of the censor without delay. Verdi consented, but the objections proved much more serious than was anticipated; changes had to be made in text and music, and the opera was not produced before February 1859. It created great enthusiasm, though the performance was not wholly to Verdi's liking; in fact it is certain that but for his eagerness to see the censor's objections overcome once for all, he would not have allowed it to proceed. Jacovacci wrote some time later boasting that he had defended the opera against the journalists. 'You are wrong', answered Verdi. 'If the work is bad the journalists were right; if it is good, attacks are of no importance. But you must agree that if any apology is needed it is due to me for the singers you produced. If you are honest you cannot but admit that I gave proof of great abnegation in not taking the score elsewhere where I could find less inept singers than you gave me.'

Operas have been written in an even shorter time than *Un Ballo in Maschera* but only when the stenographic system of the figured bass reduced to the minimum the composer's labours. That so elaborate a work as *Un Ballo* should be composed in three months is little short of a miracle.

9

'La Forza del Destino' and 'Don Carlo'

THE year 1859 is memorable in the history of Italy, for in that year Napoleon III and his army came to the help of Victor Emanuel's troops and drove the Austrians out of Lombardy. Verdi, who had been suspicious of French intentions, confessed himself mistaken and wrote to Countess Maffei:

'The miracles that have happened in these few days! I seem hardly able to believe it all. Who could have expected such generosity from our ally? Let me confess and say mea grandissima (*sic*) culpa, for I never believed that the French would come to Italy or give their blood for us without a thought of reward. I was mistaken on the first point; I hope to be equally mistaken on the second; I cannot think that Napoleon will go back on the Milan proclamation. I shall adore him as I have adored Washington; nay more, I will ask a blessing on the "great nation"; I will henceforth put up willingly with their "blague", their polite insolence, and the contempt they have for everything that is not French.'

Festivities were arranged in honour of Napoleon to which Verdi was asked to contribute a cantata. He refused, alleging that there was no time to write anything worthy of so great an occasion. 'We shall never be able to show the gratitude Napoleon's sacrifices deserve,' he wrote. Had he been able to do so, he would willingly have given his work on condition that the proceeds were devoted to wounded soldiers.

On July 14—two days after Verdi's refusal—came the news of the peace of Villafranca which put an end to the war and all hope of rescuing Venice from the Austrians. After the victory of Solferino this was a deadly blow to Italian hopes, and Verdi wrote to Countess Maffei: 'Now where is the longed-for and promised independence? What is the meaning of the proclamation of Milan? Is not Venice Italian? Such a downfall after so great a victory! All that blood for nothing! Poor, disappointed young manhood! And Garibaldi, who has gone so far as to sacrifice his old and unwavering beliefs for the sake of a king, without purpose! It's enough to make one lose one's reason.'

Napoleon after doing a noble action had, as Browning said, asked eighteenpence for it—'which is a pity'. Nice and Savoy were ceded to France.

Chosen to represent Busseto at the assembly of his province at Parma, Verdi voted for annexation to Piedmont; and with four others was

chosen to go to Turin and communicate to King Victor Emanuel the result of the plebiscite. On this occasion he met for the first time Cavour—one of his heroes—whom he later visited at Leri where the statesman had retired. The attraction appears to have been mutual. Cavour, who had no ear for music, could not feel for Verdi the admiration Verdi felt for him. But with his quickness in summing up a man's value, he must soon have discovered the gold in Verdi's nature. At any rate it was entirely due to Cavour's insistence and influence that, when the Italian Parliament was instituted, Verdi consented to stand for Busseto.

The village, however, was determined not to be deprived of the excitement of a fight at its first parliamentary election. An opponent was found, and the rival parties resorted to the usual weapons. Verdi was disgusted with the intrigues and methods of his opponents (possibly also of his own supporters). During the electoral campaign there emerged a noteworthy testimony of one of the electors to Verdi's character.

The anonymous writer begins his plea with a curious argument in which he suggests that Verdi's power to discriminate between degrees of excellence in music must enable him to determine equally well what is good and bad in politics. The conclusion, more arresting, asserts that throughout his long life Verdi had never sought honour or gain for himself, had never associated himself with any political party or movement, nor ever 'bowed to princes and potentates'. On the contrary, princes had sought his company and honoured themselves in honouring him.

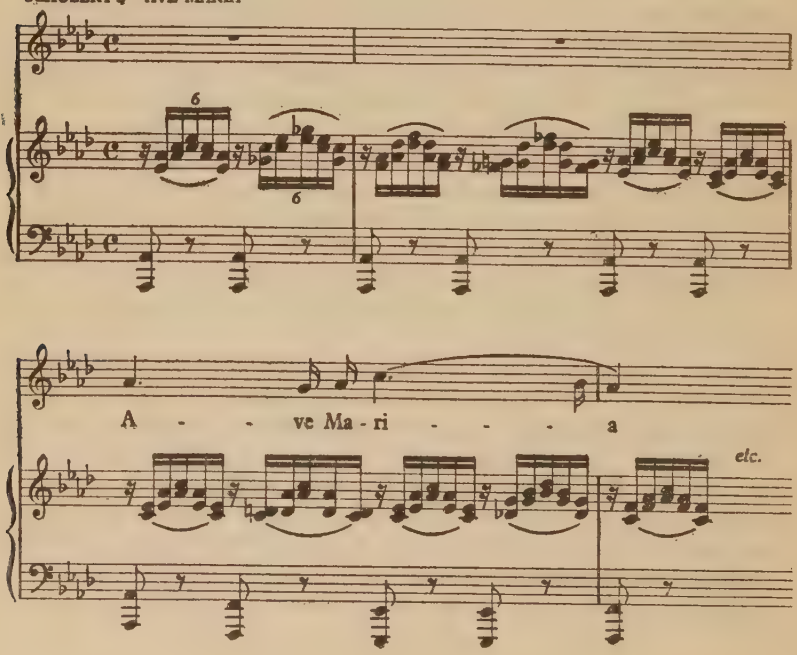
Verdi won the seat; but he never took himself seriously as a politician. In answering the letter which appointed him to the Assembly at Parma he protested 'my few talents, my studies, the art I profess, make me ill-adapted for office of this kind'. The only title he could plead was 'the great love I bear to this noble and unhappy Italy of ours'. Nothing but a sense of duty and devotion to Cavour persuaded him to enter parliament. He was elected in 1861. Cavour died the same year, and Verdi felt that if the country had lost a statesman he himself had lost a dear friend. Parliamentary sittings he found tedious, and he retired as soon as a new general election (1865) gave him the opportunity to do so without arousing comment.

During his parliamentary career Verdi found time to produce only one opera, *La Forza del Destino* (libretto by Piave), written at the commission of the Imperial Opera of Petrograd, where it was first given on November 10, 1862. The plot, taken from an old Spanish drama, tells of the tragic destiny that pursued a gallant and unhappy gentleman, Don Alvero, as Monterone's curse pursued Rigoletto. Sad as this 'destiny' is, a still sadder one is the destiny of a composer of Verdi's calibre in being fatally drawn towards such poor dramatic material. One would suspect his literary taste were it not that he wrote his best music for the best

libretti, as *Macbeth, Rigoletto, Traviata, Aïda, Otello, and Falstaff* prove beyond a doubt. But from time to time he fell a victim to the glamour of the horrible; and in such moods he would have preferred Kyd's *Spanish Tragedie* and Ford's *Broken Heart* to any of Shakespeare's dramas. There are explanations of this partiality for sensationalism. During such stirring epochs as the Garibaldian in Italy, the theatre inclines to be rather passionate and provoking than courtly and elegant; or perhaps it may be thought that the early tragedy of his life cast a shadow which obscured for him the less desirable features of *Il Trovatore* and of *La Forza del Destino*. Again, as a composer Verdi was not so much concerned with the details of a play as moved by the pity that often accompanies terror. None of these hypotheses is satisfactory. All of them have elements of truth; yet the central fact remains that Verdi occasionally delighted in theatrical horrors which in us inevitably surfeit the appetite. Nothing induces ridicule so much as tragedy that overshoots the mark.

Yet *La Forza del Destino* may some day take the place which *Il Trovatore* now holds in the estimation of the public. The story is clear enough. Don Alvaro meets his mistress and accidentally kills her father, a Spanish nobleman. Her brother determines to avenge the blot on the family escutcheon and follows the unhappy Don Alvaro first to the battlefield and then to a convent where he forces a duel on him. The slur is not avenged; it is the brother and not the lover who dies in the fight. Destiny

SCHUBERT'S "AVE MARIA"

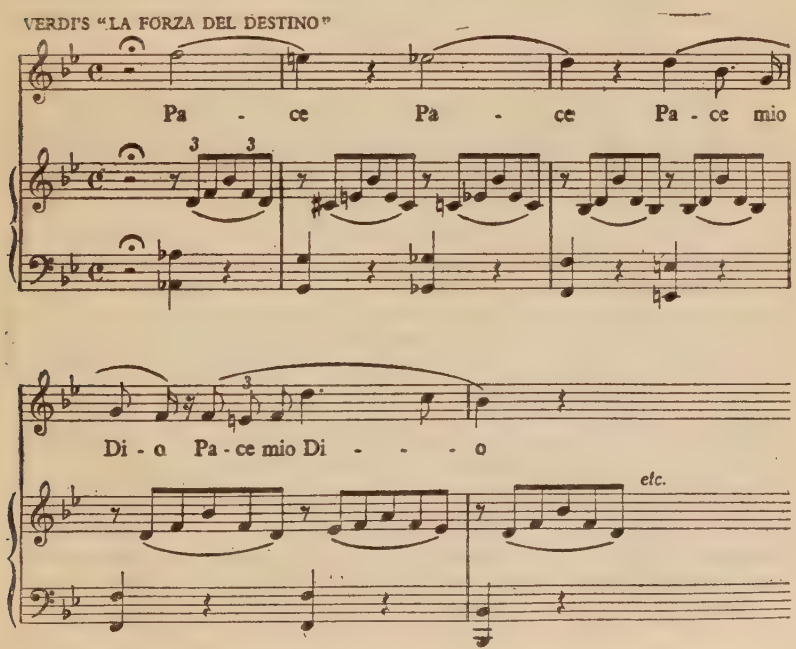


as blind as this cannot interest us. The accidental discharge of a pistol is not a good enough dramatic motive. Nevertheless Verdi succeeds in creating in us an interest for these poor creatures—for the lover, who in a single aria must tell a long story of misfortunes which began at birth; for the heroine, haunted by the memory of the awful meeting when her father was killed; and for the youth who conceives himself to be the guardian of the family honour.

The lesson of *Boccanegra*, however, was not altogether forgotten; and the gloom of the story is pierced here and there by the gaiety of the camp scene and by the humours of Fra Melitone, a crabbed old friar.

As music the opera ranks less high than *Un Ballo in Maschera*, but it has many characteristic melodies, two arias for the soprano of touching simplicity and beauty, and a couple of duets for tenor and baritone which in workmanship and melodic facility at least equal the most impassioned pages of *Trovatore*. In Fra Melitone's music we get a first glimmer of the comic genius which was to shine in *Falstaff*. The little caricature is finely drawn and fulfils well the purpose for which it was created, namely, to provide contrast to the darkness which surrounds the chief characters.

The opera made no very deep impression at Petrograd where Verdi, however, found 'some delightful society'; departing from his usual custom he accepted invitations to receptions and admired 'the most



charming manners, very different from the impertinent politeness of Paris'. The opera was much more successful in Italy, where it still holds its place in the repertory.

In the same year Verdi was called upon to write a *Hymn of the Nations* on words by Boito for the Universal Exhibition in London. The work was in reality a cantata for soprano solo, chorus and orchestra, and in the last section the three themes of the British National Anthem, the Marseillaise, and the Italian Royal March were skilfully woven together. Owing to Sir Michael Costa's hostility the work could not be given, as had been intended, at Covent Garden, and had to be produced at Her Majesty's Theatre. Costa, as will be remembered, had relinquished some years before the conductorship at Her Majesty's to join a rival organization at Covent Garden, and his post had been offered by Lumley to Verdi, who would have accepted it but for intrigues in Milan and in London, to which Costa, perhaps, was not a stranger.

Verdi was not satisfied with the form of certain scenes in *La Forza de Destino* and would not hear of its being given at the Scala without revision. Piave was urged to rewrite it. To the new score the composer added an overture, a small chorus, and a final trio, and in 1869 *La Forza* was given at the Scala with great success. The performance so pleased Verdi that in a letter to Senator Piroli he expressed the hope that the government would subsidize a theatre which so well deserved support.

To a critic who claimed to have discovered a likeness between the soprano's aria in *La Forza* and Schubert's *Ave Maria* Verdi wrote a letter which deserves to be quoted in full:

'I could not reasonably resent the article in *La Perseveranza*,' he writes from Genoa in 1869. 'You are perfectly within your rights and you do well to temper your praise with censure. As you know, I never complain of hostile criticism and I never thank my admirers, though perhaps here I am wrong. I love independence for myself and I respect it in others. I am therefore grateful to you for the tact you showed in Milan. Since you had to write an article on my opera, you were right not to be influenced by a handshake or a friendly visit. And since you ask, I gladly answer that your article did not and could not displease me.

'I do not know what actually happened between you and Ricordi. But it may be that Ricordi, who, I believe, has a special liking for the *cantabile* of Eleonora, was a little shocked to hear you say that it was an imitation of Schubert. If it is, I am no less surprised than Giulio, because such is my ignorance of music that I cannot even remember how many years it is since I heard Schubert's *Ave Maria*, and consequently it would be exceedingly difficult for me to imitate it. Do not imagine that I am boasting of my ignorance. It happens to be the absolute truth. There is very little music in my house; I have never been to a music library or a publisher. I keep myself informed about the best contemporary operas not by studying them, but by hearing them in the theatre,

with an object which will be evident to you. Let me repeat that of all composers, past and present, I am the least erudite. But—to avoid any suspicion of "blague"—please remember that I say *erudition* and not *knowledge* of music. It would be untrue to say that in my young days I did not go through a long and severe training, which enabled me to bend the notes to my will and obtain the effects I had in mind. If I write anything that is not according to the rules, it is because strict adherence to the rules does not give me what I want or because I do not agree with the accepted canons. The counterpoint books need to be revised.

A performance of *Macbeth* had been arranged to take place in Paris in 1865 and Verdi, who believed this to be one of his best works, went to France with a revised version dedicated to Barezzi.

While in Paris he was asked by the French Government to write an opera for the Universal Exhibition of 1867, and he accepted their offer. The subject was to be Don Carlo; Méry and Camille du Locle were to write the libretto.

The French authorities stipulated that *Don Carlo* should be cast on a scale in accordance with what was considered the tradition of 'grand opera'—something eminently spectacular—a vast canvas and a long score. The subject itself was more congenial to the French than to the Italian collaborator. The unhappy love of Don Carlo for his stepmother may commend itself as a dramatic motif to men trained in the classical traditions, but it could not appeal in the same way to a composer deeply, if unconsciously, pledged to romantic ideals. In Schiller's drama the Marquis of Posa was an advocate of the rights of man. But Verdi knew to his cost that if it is difficult for the dramatist to preach from the stage without impeding the progress of the action, the composer who attempts it is courting disaster. The Marquis of Posa is the hero of the drama; in the opera Don Carlo had to become the central figure. Above all Verdi was worried by the extent of the work. He had very clear ideas about the proper length of each act, which sprang from a thorough understanding of his own genius. 'A long libretto', he wrote, 'means, for the composer, enormous time and labour. . . . To write well one must be able to write quickly, in one breath, as it were, leaving the work of correction and revision till later. Otherwise there is a risk of writing music like a mosaic, without style or character.' This cannot, of course, be applied to all composers, but it is certainly true of Verdi. It is one of the reasons why he escaped outside musical influences; it is the foundation of his quality and shape—quality which is never laboured; shape that however varied in details never oversteps well-defined limits, every act falling into well-marked divisions. It is typical of an art which, using the singer as the exponent of the composer's finest thought, is lyrical before all else.

Having accepted the conditions, Verdi began to write with an eye to

the special requirements of Paris. His stamp is on every page of *Don Carlo;* and yet he says little of importance that he has not said before. This is the real weakness of the opera. It has a duet for tenor and baritone which is justly famous amongst Verdian melodies, and the finale of the third act is a model of its kind. But one cannot avoid the impression that in writing this opera Verdi was often preoccupied, never quite at ease. The pace is slightly slower; there is passion, but not of an intoxicating kind; the salient melodies are beautiful but if we compare them with those of *La Forza*, they show a loss of impetus and become somewhat formal. Perhaps the coldness of a theme that was forced upon him had a chilling effect on his fancy. One of the best pages in the opera is the song in which Philip of Spain laments the loveless, empty splendour of his existence.

Don Carlo was received in Paris politely but without enthusiasm; and Verdi, who had expected a warmer welcome, was disappointed. He had endeavoured to adapt his style to the taste of the Parisian public and he felt that he was not altogether to blame if the conditions imposed upon him were absurd. There is reason to believe that the cold reception was not due solely to lack of interest in the music but to other circumstances which bore no relation to the opera or the performance. For example, while Verdi was preparing the score of *Don Carlo*, Italy had joined Prussia in the war against Austria. It was natural that the French should be dissatisfied with this step of a former ally. Verdi, foreseeing a hostile reception, had even tried to be released from his contract with the Opera. 'You can imagine', he wrote to a friend, 'what a pleasure it must be for an Italian who loves his country to live in Paris now'. In this, however, he was exaggerating; he was not allowed to withdraw, and his stay in the French capital appears to have been as pleasant as could be wished. When, however, the Empress Eugénie, who, attending the first performance, was offended by the ideas propounded by the Marquis of Posa and deliberately turned her back on the stage, the action could only be interpreted by the faithful public as a declaration that Her Majesty was not amused. And considering how seldom—in former times, of course—a work of art was judged solely on its merits in Paris, and how accustomed the Parisians have been to applaud works which in spite of many admirable features are formal rather than emotional (which is the main charge against *Don Carlo*), the conclusion seems inevitable that it was the Imperial gesture and not public opinion which decided the fate of *Don Carlo*. In Italy the opera had a curious career. Verdi prepared a revised version, much curtailed and without dances, for the Italian theatres. But apparently only one conductor—Angelo Mariani—was able to convince the public and to arouse enthusiasm; since Mariani's death occasional revivals have been only moderately successful.

In November 1868 Rossini died in Paris. Verdi had known him as

well as it was possible for two men of such widely different temperaments to know each other; he therefore wrote at once to Ricordi suggesting a Requiem Mass to which all the most distinguished Italian composers of the time should contribute a share—all of them to give their services gratis (including the performers). He proposed to have one performance only, so that there should be no material gain. The Mass, after the Bologna performance, was to be presented to the archives of the Liceo Musicale. That the work was bound in the circumstances to lack unity of style Verdi foresaw, but this seemed to him of no importance since the Requiem was not to be an 'object of curiosity or speculation' but a tribute to Rossini's memory. But Verdi failed to foresee another and more serious difficulty in the jealousy the choice of composers was bound to awaken. The commission which met to appoint them consisted of Lauro Rossi, Alberto Mazzucato, Ronchetti-Monteviti, and Giulio Ricordi, though we may reasonably suppose that the originator of the project was consulted and his advice followed. The final selection was as follows: *Requiem*, Buzzola; *Dies Irae*, Bazzini; *Tuba Mirum*, Pedrotti; *Quid Sum Miser*, Cagnoni; *Recordare*, Ricci; *Ingemisco*, Nini; *Confutatis*, Boucheron; *Lacrymosa*, Coccia; *Domine Jesu*, Gaspari; *Sanctus*, Platania; *Angus Dei*, Petrella; *Lux Aeterna*, Mabellini; *Libera Me*, Verdi. Of the whole company, with the exception of Verdi, Bazzini alone is remembered to-day. Pedrotti, Ricci, and Petrella enjoyed some popularity in their lifetime, and the choice was perhaps dictated by expediency. The others were no doubt selected more for their position than their skill in composition. But many people resented the choice, among them Angelo Mariani, Verdi's friend and favourite conductor, who also dabbled in composition. He wrote to Verdi inquiring casually what the Milan commission was going to do and suggesting that if his services should be required, Verdi had 'only to command'. His services were indeed in requisition, but as conductor and not, as he had hoped, as composer. In his reply Verdi declared himself now 'but a pen, to write a handful of notes as well as I can, and thus offer my obolus to a national celebration'. He continues:

'A great artist is dead; an individual (no matter who) invites his contemporaries to honour that artist, and through him their own art; a piece of music composed for the occasion is to be played in the greatest church of the city to which Rossini may be said to belong as an artist, and in order that this event should nourish no miserable vanities or individual interests, it must be hidden away after the performance into the archives of a celebrated Liceo. . . . In this way we shall contribute something to musical history and keep charlatans at a distance. If this is granted, it follows that each of us has to do his best without being "kindly requested" before the event or praised and thanked afterwards.'

This and a good deal besides, attacking the 'selfish indifference which is the ruin of the country', the hunger for 'shameless adulation', the reluctance to 'let personality be hidden in a generous idea', constituted a lecture that Mariani did not relish. He did not refuse to conduct the Mass, but he took no further interest in the project and was certainly not disappointed when shortly afterwards it collapsed. His indifference was probably a contributory cause of the failure; another must be sought in the disappointment generally felt that the commission should have ignored Boito and included nonentities like Buzzola. But the determining factor was the unpractical nature of the scheme. There were only too many composers and singers willing to give their services—merely because in so doing they could advertise themselves. It was a different matter for the rank and file, the ill-paid choir and orchestra who could hardly be asked to give a week's work without payment, and could expect no glory or gratitude when they had done so. Verdi was neither helpful nor accommodating. The Mass, he insisted, must be performed at Bologna and on the anniversary of Rossini's death or not at all. He wanted sufficient rehearsals. He had written the concluding 'Libera Me' for soprano and chorus, ending in a fugue, and he pointed out that a fugue could not be learnt as quickly as the Rataplan in *La Forza del Destino*. When the impresario of the Bologna opera refused to lend his company for the performance, when it was rumoured that the Milan commission did not regret the difficulties which made it probable that Milan and not Bologna would see the performance, Verdi advised the Commission to return the MSS. to the composers. Thus ended a project which, meant to honour the memory of Rossini, succeeded in laying the first stone for the monument raised by Verdi later to the memory of Manzoni.

About this time (December 1869) Camille du Locle (part-author of the libretto of *Don Carlo*) sent Verdi a new libretto, which he read and returned, accompanying it with a letter in which he referred to his experience while preparing the production of *Don Carlo* in Paris, and discussed the tastes of the Italian and the French public. He ended with a declaration which constitutes an article of faith. He does not mean to write another opera for Paris, he says, simply because he has come to the conclusion that his music cannot be given in Paris as it should be given:

'In your theatres there are too many know-alls. Everybody knows too much and criticizes in the light of his knowledge, his tastes, and—worst of all—his *system*, without taking into account the character and individuality of the author. Everybody puts forward his own personal prejudices, and the author, living in an atmosphere of distrust, cannot fail in the end to distrust himself; he begins to correct and adjust, and ends by spoiling his work . . . the result becomes a mosaic—beautiful perhaps but still a mosaic. . . . No one will deny Rossini's genius, yet in

spite of it one detects the fatal influence of Paris in *William Tell*; one feels that the pace is no longer the bold, confident stride of the *Barber*.'

He has no intention himself of passing again under the Caudine Forks of the French theatre. 'Singers', he continues, 'should sing not as they themselves like, but as the composer directs them; the chorus and orchestra must give themselves unsparingly: everything must bow to the will of one person—the composer. . . . This may sound like tyranny . . .' he concludes, 'but opera demands unity and every detail must contribute to that unity.'

After discussing the effect of an unfavourable atmosphere on composition and the difficulties of rehearsal with no firm hand at the helm, he returns to the question of taste and says that while in Italy the public determines the fate of an opera, in Paris 'after half a dozen chords one hears: "Oh, la! ce n'est pas bon . . . c'est commun . . . ca n'ira pas à Paris." ' He asks the meaning of such expressions as applied to a work of art. His own ideas on artistic matters differ too much from those of the Parisians; and he concludes that he is not the composer to please Paris: 'I believe in *inspiration*; you in workmanship. I admit your *criterion* as a basis for discussion, but I want *art* in all its manifestations—not *amusement*, *artifice*, *system*, which is what you prefer. Am I right? Am I wrong? . . . My backbone is not supple enough for me to bow and deny convictions which are deeply rooted.'

The letter helps us to understand him when he speaks of 'truth',[6] as synonymous with inspiration. He regards the idea that flashes in the mind as something divine, on no account to be rejected or questioned. This, for him, is revelation, this is truth, and the composer must express it regardless of fashion and even knowledge, for 'too much thought' is apt to weigh down the wings of inspiration. These axioms cannot be accepted as applying to all composers or as offering any infallible test for good and bad work. A minor composer will never rise to greatness by the simple process of putting down his thoughts as they come in what he conceives to be an inspired moment. Verdi himself, without swerving from his attachment to truth and inspiration, has on occasion written music which falls short of his best. But these maxims, illuminating in connexion with his own art, are at one with his general outlook on all music.

[6] 'If artists could understand the meaning of truth, there would be no longer music of the past and music of the future, realistic and idealistic painters, classical and romantic poetry—but true poetry, true paintings, and true music. Letter to Barbiera, 1867.

10

'Aïda' and the Requiem

WHEN Antonio Barezzi died in 1867, Verdi, who could plan a great artistic tribute in memory of a man he admired, could give no more than a tribute of sorrow to the man he had loved. He comforted his friend's deathbed and averred ever after that a better man had never lived—with some reason, for Barezzi's interest in the little boy who came as an assistant to his shop was the impulse of a singularly liberal mind. He was a flourishing merchant, but not a Croesus; he had a daughter and sons of his own to provide for; but he gave to Verdi that which endeared him and endured—the affection of a friend. Outwardly their relations resembled those of father and son. Verdi always spoke of him with the respect then considered due from the young to an older man. But the absence of a blood relationship made possible also a friendship such as cannot exist when instinct draws two generations apart.

Three years later there died at Naples the Director of the College of Music; the post was offered to Verdi, who declined it. He thought that while he could still 'do something' it was best for him to keep to opera.

In the meantime the Egyptian Government, anxious to mark the opening of the Suez Canal with special festivities, had approached Verdi with a view to his writing an opera for the occasion. At first he would not entertain the idea—probably because he feared a repetition of the history of *Don Carlo*. But when Camille du Locle sent him the sketch of *Aïda*, he fell under the spell of the story and on June 2, 1870 accepted the proposal. In December the opera was ready. Verdi had made all the necessary arrangements for the first rehearsals at Cairo when it was discovered that Mariette Bey, the French Egyptologist, who had charge of the scenery, could not leave Paris while it was invested by the German armies. Paris surrendered in March 1871; but no communication with Mariette Bey was possible for some time. Verdi had asked for time in order to write an opera in the style of the 'Grande Boutique' (so he nicknamed the Paris Opéra) and a few months had sufficed for the task of composition; but unseen difficulties crowded around the first performance and delayed it till December 1871.

The subject is well designed to appeal to a composer of Verdi's temper. The pomp and circumstance of battle stirred him no less profoundly than a story of thwarted aims, and in *Aïda* the two elements, the

heroic and the pitiful, are admirably blended. Aïda herself is the captive daughter of a King. Her beauty (the traditional make-up makes Aïda hideous—surely a mistake) commends her to her captors, and she becomes the companion of Pharaoh's daughter. But her beauty is her undoing; it inspires the love of Rhadames and the jealousy of Amneris; it induces Rhadames to betray his country and in the end brings about the death of both lovers. Rhadames is condemned to be buried alive Aïda enters the tomb while it is unguarded and only reveals herself to him after it has been sealed.

Aïda has been considered by some critics to mark a turning-point in the evolution of Verdian art. There is little to support this claim. The lyrical vein which runs through *Aïda* is undoubtedly richer than before; the touch is just as sure in scenes of picturesque description and local colour as in scenes of ardent passion. Verdi's genius never falters for a moment. But these riper powers do not lead him altogether away from the old forms. 'Celeste Aïda' is a typical aria, and Amneris's great scene in the last act has in its divisions and sub-divisions something that recalls the old formalities. But these lyrical pieces are not exuberant. There is closer and more constant contact between melody and dramatic action. Nothing, not a superfluous note, impedes the action. *Aïda* may not improperly be considered a bridge between the old system and the new—between the system which recognized traditional habits and the system which knows no other law than that of dramatic expediency. But it is a bridge that spans no chasm. It may take us a step farther in the direction of *Otello* and *Falstaff*, but the direction is that in which *Macbeth*, *Rigoletto*, and *Traviata* were already pointing—the direction where lay suppler expression and more flexible forms. If the tenor's aria has its root in tradition, Aïda's 'Qui Rhadames verrà' displays a lyrical beauty so poignant and at the same time so perfectly fitting as to foreshadow the closer, more sinewy lyrical expression of *Otello*. No clearer evidence of the quickening of sensitiveness could be found than the short phrase in which Rhadames returns thanks to the gods when he learns from Amneris of Aïda's escape. It is a first hint of the rhythmic and harmonic design which in *Falstaff* becomes a pattern for the idyll of Anne Page and John Fenton.

Mr. Edward Prime-Stevenson has written an admirable analysis of *Aïda*[7] showing to what new uses Verdi had put his themes and also how many of them are blooms from the same plant that produced *Rigoletto* and *Il Trovatore*. The similarity of themes is one test and a reliable one, for determining continuity of style. Another way in which we can test development and progress is to consider the use of local colour and the nature of the change to which melodic designs have been subjected.

[7] 'Verdi and the theme structure of *Aïda*' in *Long-haired Iopas*. By Edward Prime-Stevenson.

Oriental colour has become a commonplace for us who know on the one hand the rich palette of Rimsky-Korsakov, and the dactylic drum-beats of *Chu-Chin-Chow*. If we compare any modern work with *Aïda* we are struck by the judgement and restraint shown by Verdi, who never lost sight of the fact that the play's the thing, and that therein the mind of the listener must be held. The orchestral local colour is but a fitting frame for the picture; its conspicuous merit is that it blends perfectly with the dramatic atmosphere of the story. We are never conscious of abrupt transitions, like those in, say, *Turandot*. Sometimes the dramatic and the picturesque melt imperceptibly, sometimes they proceed harmoniously on parallel lines, supporting, heightening the expression, widening the range. Aïda's aria 'O cieli azzurri', perhaps the most beautiful and most poignant song Verdi ever wrote, shows his method to perfection. It has come not from slow deliberation or research, but from the conviction that music must keep as close as possible to the spirit of the words—must go behind the words to the thought which dictated them. The oboe's melody first conjures up visions of remote lands where Aïda lived and as the thought becomes more poignant the music wavers between the major and the minor key.[8] The phrase which dominates the aria recalls, as Mr. Prime-Stevenson has pointed out, a passage in *Il Trovatore*; there is no better way of gauging Verdi's development than a comparison between the two melodies.

The opera opens with a short but sufficient prelude. Verdi, perhaps with an eye to the 'Grande Boutique', also provided an overture, which was played through by the orchestra under Faccio during a rehearsal at the Scala. At the end conductor and players rose as one man to acclaim the composer; but at that moment he was giving orders for the immediate collection of score and parts, which were never seen again, and were probably burnt at his death together with a mass of other manuscripts and papers according to his directions.

The triumph of *Aïda* had the happy result of bringing together Verdi and Boito. Their previous collaborations had brought no real understanding. Ricordi had for some time been openly anxious to smooth the way to partnership, if not friendship, but had found difficulties in the suspicions which years of misunderstanding and temperamental difference had created. As far back as 1863 Boito, champion of new ideas, had in an impetuous speech expressed the hope that Italian art might break through the 'old and imbecile' ideas surrounding it, and free itself from the vulgarity which was its bane. He concluded with a reference to a 'pure and seemly altar, now besmirched like the walls of a brothel'.

Verdi not unnaturally thought the shaft was aimed at himself. He had been accused before of pandering to popular taste and had heard, no doubt, from some candid friend, how Boito had turned the tenor's

[8] 'Honey drawn from bitter plants.'

aria in the third act of *Rigoletto* into a polka,[9] thus showing his contempt for a too facile tune. Nevertheless Verdi's reply was both moderate and wise. 'If I among others have defiled the altar—as Boito says—let him clean it and I shall be the first to light a candle in his honour'; so he wrote to Tito Ricordi. But he did not include Boito amongst the contributors to the Requiem in honour of Rossini: that would have been not only to turn the other cheek but to deny his own beliefs. Verdi and Boito complemented one another; they were kindred spirits in so far as they sought the same end; but their methods were different, their temperaments diametrically opposite. Verdi began with respect for a past on which he meant to build; Boito meant to sweep it aside. Verdi ended, as he had begun, with the firm belief that inspiration must be left alone, free from the thought that kills. Boito wrote *Mefistofele* in a few months, but a lifetime did not suffice to complete his second opera, *Nerone*. Verdi believed in the value of national tradition; Boito in the stimulus of foreign influence. Verdi wrote music quickly, but considered long before expressing any opinion; Boito, too cautious a composer, was a ruthless speaker.

The hostility which Boito first evinced towards Verdi was but the resentment of an impatient young man of genius for those who stood in his way. When *Mefistofele* was produced, and hissed, we may be sure that loudest in their condemnation were Verdi's admirers, who would see in Boito's theories an attack on their own ideals. Boito himself had little patience with anything that savoured of conservatism; he knew, as every man of genius knows, that there was something in his mind which placed him above the crowd. He possessed, moreover, what Verdi never acquired—a vast and profound culture. The libretto of *Nerone* is a marvel of classical erudition; and the libretti of *Otello* and *Falstaff* show how deeply he had penetrated the genius of Shakespeare. *Mefistofele* may be unequal, yet considered as either music or literature it reveals a mind quick, eager, and commanding, and a boundless ambition. Doubtless Corrado Ricci exaggerates when he asserts that *Mefistofele* embodies Goethe's *Faust*, revealing a sense of measure and clearness that are sometimes lacking in the original. But given the necessity to reduce Goethe's poem to the proportions of a libretto, it is difficult to see how Boito's work could be bettered.

Musically *Mefistofele* boasts some fine pages; the small liking for it shown by audiences outside Italy is counterbalanced by its constant favour in Italy, where it has been given in twenty theatres in one year (1912). In Paris it has been produced once only, yet the best French

[9] Contempt of a tune does not imply contempt for all the works of the composer. In 1880 Fauré and Messager published a 'Souvenir de Bayreuth sur les thèmes favoris de L'Anneau du Nibelung' which did for Wagner what Boito had done for Verdi. Yet Fauré was an admirer of Wagnerian art.

musician of his day, Saint-Saëns, proclaimed the prologue 'a miracle of modern music for originality, audacity and inspiration'. For the modern critic who reads *Mefistofele* for the first time the task is rendered difficult by the fact that Boito, essentially a pioneer, went too far afield to blaze the trail effectively. The open fifths of the scene in Greece, like the broken rhythm of the first act, have now been outdone even by so Italian a composer as Puccini; the handling of the choral and orchestral masses, the texture, more substantial than in other Italian operas, the closer relations between singer and orchestra—these are to-day commonplaces. But when *Mefistofele* was first produced these features, new to Italian opera, seemed revolutionary to the Milan audience.

It was natural that Boito should resent the attacks of those who professed to find in Verdi their champion. There is not the slightest ground for the belief that Verdi ever said or did anything to hurt Boito. It is certain, on the other hand, that Boito's unguarded speeches and bold championship of new ideas did not commend him to one who held such clearly defined views about tradition.

Verdi showed little desire to meet Boito when Tito Ricordi wrote to him thus:—

'Ever since the performance of *Aïda* at the Scala, Boito, Faccio, and myself have often discussed the question of a new libretto for you, written by Boito. . . . After the production of *Mefistofele*, Boito wrote to me to say that he would write no more libretti, unless he were lucky enough to write one for Verdi, when he would put aside any other work. . . .'

and later:

'I deeply regret that a man of your worth should not take Boito at his real value. I know that Boito—if I remember aright—acted foolishly, but he is one of those nervous and eccentric men who either do not quite know what they are doing or else can never find a way to keep matters straight. The fact is that at our frequent meetings Boito has always spoken of you with great admiration and enthusiasm . . . and in my long personal experience of him I have always found him most frank and loyal, indeed in every way a gentleman.'

Such were the steps that led first to collaboration and, later, to close friendship between Boito and Verdi. But before meeting Boito Verdi had added to his operas his first religious work—the Requiem Mass. Alessandro Manzoni's death in 1873 had moved him to tears. Manzoni, whom even political opponents called a saint, embodied for Verdi the ideal of poet and of man, one whose simple life and unassailable virtue had sweetened the earth. After the funeral he visited the cemetery and on his return he wrote to the Mayor of Milan offering to write a Requiem Mass 'and so fulfil a great longing'. The Mass was written in the

course of a few months and was given for the first time in the church of St. Mark, Milan, on May 22, 1874.

No other successful work of Verdi's has attracted so much hostile criticism as the Requiem. It is known that Bülow, after glancing through it, condemned it in unmeasured terms; how some years later he heard it again and, although the performance was far from adequate, confessed to having been moved to tears; how, as a result, he wrote a dignified letter to Verdi frankly admitting his error, which he ascribed to partisanship. The same reason accounts for a good deal of the adverse criticism that has been aimed at the Requiem. If we hold that the only music worthy to illustrate a religious subject is that of Bach, Handel, and Palestrina, then the Requiem, with its passionate outburst, will disappoint us. But Christianity cannot be compassed by the art of any one master, whatever his gifts. Painters have found in it inspiration for works differing no less in style, aim, and method, than the art of Bach differs from that of César Franck or Verdi; neither style nor school provides the final criterion of judgement, but sincerity—and who can deny the sincerity of Verdi's Requiem?

This is not the music of a mystic; but the 'Mass for the dead', prayer though it be, is more vividly dramatic than any tragedy. The Mass offers no vision of eternal blessedness, nor is it essentially concerned with eternity. It is true it recalls the promise of the Christian religion: the judgement, the punishment, and the reward, eternal darkness and eternal light. But it is essentially a prayer for peace; beginning and ending on that theme, it has its root in the sorrow which is 'the daily bread of life'; and the hope that the end may be peace.

That is what Verdi expresses: and the opening, the murmured words, the soft music recall, not the peace of heaven but,the peace of the churchyard. There the composer takes his stand. There he meditates on the destiny of mankind; there he sees the apocalyptic vision of the grave giving up its dead; there he prays that it may fade away into peace—the peace for which no one longed more ardently than he himself. His conception of the hereafter coincides with his conception of the present; he places peace as the summit of happiness; no one could wish more sincerely for escape from the world than this man of the theatre who never left his 'desert' of Sant' Agata without longing for the day of return, who could be at rest only away from the 'business-mongers' of politics, from the crowds, the splendour, and the meanness of a 'world ruled by brute force'.[10]

The music of the Requiem Mass has many points of technical interest, chief among which is the double fugue of the 'Sanctus'—a masterly movement. Its aim is not the dignity and massive strength usually associated with this form but melodiousness maintained through

[10] Letter to Peppina Negroni-Prati.

all the episodes which the scholastic form imposes. The disposition of the trumpets in the 'Tuba Mirum' was probably suggested by Berlioz's 'Messe des Morts'; the treatment, however, is original and individual.

The first performance was given in the church of St. Mark, Milan, on May 22, 1874 with Stolz, Waldmann, Capponi, and Maini as the chief singers, Verdi himself conducting. A solo in the 'Dies Irae' on the words 'liber scriptus' was specially written for Mme Waldmann; but when preparations were being made for a performance in Paris in the following year, Verdi suggested that this should be omitted, as there was little time for rehearsal. 'The notes are easy enough', he wrote, 'but the true meaning of it all has to be considered. Nothing for instance is easier than the bass entry in "Mors stupebit". Yet it is exceedingly difficult to sing ("a dirsi") it well'. The London performance apparently gave some trouble to the organizers. It was feared that the Mass might not attract a large enough audience at the Albert Hall, and Covent Garden was suggested instead. But Verdi would not hear of it, and the first performance was given at the Albert Hall (May 15, 1875) with a chorus of 1,200 voices prepared by Barnby.

While the rehearsals of *Aida* in Naples were in progress the soprano, Mme Stolz, fell ill; and all work being thus brought to a standstill, Verdi employed his leisure in writing a string quartet which he did not intend to publish. This is the only work by Verdi the authorship of which could not be easily determined from internal evidence. Obviously meant as an experiment, it succeeds far better than most experiments. Verdi does not use the medium with the aplomb of a born composer of chamber music, but with restraint and ease. His creative power is not kindled to white heat, but it is stimulated by the novelty of the experience. He enjoys his self-appointed task; he likes to be at grips with problems that are not those of the stage and of dramatic expression. The delight of the artist in his own work is here, and communicates itself to the listener.

The letters which Verdi wrote at this time about the education of young musicians, apart from their intrinsic importance, give us an insight into his own tastes and predilections and are not out of place here. To Francesco Florimo, who had urged him to accept the directorship of the Naples Conservatorio, he wrote (4-1-1871) :—

'If it had been possible . . . it would have been my pride to help the students in their exacting work. . . . I should have liked seeing them with one foot in the past and the other in the present (and the future; for I am not frightened of the music of the future). I would say to them: "practise assiduously writing fugues; stick to it, for only thus will you learn to write without fumbling, to write in real parts and modulate without affectation. Study Palestrina and some of his contemporaries; then go to Marcello and pay special attention to his recitatives. Don't listen to much modern music; don't be dazed by mere beauty of har-

mony and instrumental colour, or by the chord of the diminished seventh." Then, when he has studied long enough and read widely in literature as well, I would say to my pupil: "Now write if you will, write what you really feel, and if you have any talent, you will be a composer. At any rate you will not swell the crowd of the imitators; they are the sickly ones of our time, who seek and seek and while doing good work at times, never succeed in their quest. . . ." I hope you will discover a man learned and severe. Licence and errors of counterpoint may be admitted in the theatre, where they are sometimes effective, but never in the schools.'

Asked to be a member of a commission appointed to reform the study of music in the Italian conservatoires, Verdi refused because he thought that every principal should be given full liberty to act according to his lights.

Some years later when another commission was set up he again refused to participate for the same reason, writing to Baccelli, the minister for education—

'It is painful for me to answer, as circumstances and convictions force me, with a refusal, and to say that no Commissions and Regulations will ever alter the evils we all deplore. . . .'

But, urged to make practical suggestions, he wrote out the following 'scheme of desiderata':

'What is wanted is: (1) A new man, an artist of genius, free from all academic bias.

(2) Protection from the government—namely: a subsidy for the theatre—not taxes. Under the present conditions the impresarios cannot meet the demands of the performers and of the public. Instead of serving art as art should be served, they are forced, after a hopeless fight against obstacles, to decamp, to go into bankruptcy, or—what is worse—to degrade art with performances that are neither good nor creditable. . .'

He ends by asserting that so long as these conditions are tolerated, his decision not to participate in any commission will remain unalterable.

He was convinced that in their effort to overcome known abuses the authorities often opened the door to worse. He noted also 'an odd antagonism' between theorists and practical men. Hence rather than plan reforms for schools he wished to call attention to the much-needed reform of the theatre, believing that if the theatre could be put on a sound basis there would be no lack of singers or players. He would have liked the government to provide the chorus and orchestra for the opera-houses in Rome, Naples, and Milan, with a school where singing would be taught free to those who would engage to sing in the theatre for a time without pay. 'Singers would thus acquire knowledge and practical experience, studying voice production and solfeggio, and practising speaking exercises so as to acquire clear and perfect diction'. Literature was to be studied alongside of music.

He would admit no compromise. 'These are my ideas', he writes to Giuseppe Piroli. 'Are they acceptable to the Commission? If so I am at the service of His Excellency; if not, I had best return to Sant' Agata.'

He attached special importance to solfeggio, and attributed to its practice the excellence of the singers of the past. To the study of past masters he looked for enlightenment. Boito asked him to name six earlier Italian composers who would form the basis of a curriculum for singers. The following is Verdi's list:[11]

1500 *Palestrina.*
Vittoria
Luca Marenzio
Allegri
1600 *Carissmi.*
Cavalli
(later) Lotti
Alessandro—*Scarlatti*
Marcello
Leo
1700 *Pergolesi*
Jomelli
(later) *Piccini*

In the past he saw solidity, order, stability. The present (1875) he found disconcerting.

'I don't know what to say about the present musical ferment', he wrote in 1873 to Arrivabene. 'One man wants to be a melodist like Bellini, another a harmonist like Meyerbeer. I believe in neither the one nor the other and I should like young men at the outset of their career to be neither melodists, harmonists, realists, idealists, nor futurists —the devil take them all! Melody and harmony are merely the means which the artist has at his hand. If a time comes when there will be no longer any question of melody and harmony, of Italian and German schools, of past, and future, and the rest: then the kingdom of art will begin.

'There is another evil of the time, the fear that haunts these young men. Nobody writes with abandon; when the younger generation sets out to write, their first consideration is not the public but the critics.

'You tell me that I owe my success to the blending of the ideals of two schools. *I never gave a single thought to it.* Have no fear; art will not perish, and believe me, the moderns, too, have contributed something.'

After the triumph of *Aïda*, most of the Italian theatres wished to honour the composer by inviting him to attend their own first performance

[11] If only six were required, he suggested those whose names appear in italics. 'But', he added, 'the good composers of that age are so many that the choice is difficult.'

of the work. An invitation of this kind came from the President of the Teatro Comunale of Trieste. Verdi made this characteristic reply:

'For artistic reasons I considered it necessary to be present when *Aïda* was first produced in two or three of the biggest theatres and so I went to Milan, Naples, and Parma . . . Now that *Aïda* is making its own way I leave it to its fate, hoping that the heart no less than the mind will help its interpretation in accordance with my intentions.

'I thank the Directors of the Trieste theatre for their courteous invitation to preside over the first performance, but as my presence is not essential to the production, I prefer to follow my custom of never entering a theatre for the mere purpose of exhibiting my person in the manner of a raree-show.'

11

'Otello' and 'Falstaff'

ACCORDING to report, it was the conductor, Franco Faccio, and the publisher, Giulio Ricordi, who first suggested Shakespeare's *Othello* as a libretto that must interest Verdi. The idea must have attracted him long before the suggestion was made: so much is certain, though he did not actually include *Othello* among the subjects to be considered, probably because he was unwilling to employ a text used a few years before by Rossini. In August 1879 Ricordi and Faccio broached the idea to Verdi during dinner. The following day Faccio brought in Boito, who explained the details of the scheme, and three days later sent a first sketch which Verdi liked and urged him to elaborate, 'since it may be of use to you, or to me, or to somebody else'. But when the libretto was finished, he refused to read it for fear that if he read and liked it he might feel pledged to set it to music. After a while his reluctance was overcome; Verdi, still refusing definitely to bind himself, set tentatively to work.

A minor incident came near to upsetting all the preparations. When Boito went to Naples to conduct the first performance of *Mefistofele* he made a speech at a banquet given in his honour, which, as misrepresented in a local newspaper, gave new offence to Verdi. The report said that Boito had begun the libretto of *Otello* rather against his will; but, as the work proceeded, the subject had fascinated him and he much regretted his inability to write the music himself. On learning this, Verdi wrote to Faccio:

'It may well be that an after-dinner speech carries little weight, but unfortunately it may give rise to comments and the idea will go round that it was I who enticed Boito to work on this subject. . . . The worst of it is that Boito's regret that he cannot write the music himself will give rise to the notion that he has no hope of seeing it set suitably by myself. I see clearly all this . . . and therefore beg you, as his oldest and staunchest friend, to tell Boito when he returns to Milan . . . that I give him back his MS. intact, without a suspicion of resentment or rancour. Moreover, the libretto is my property, and I am ready to make him a present of it if he wishes to set it to music. If he accepts, I shall be happy in the hope of having thus contributed in some small way to the art we both love.'

Back in Milan, Boito persuaded Verdi without difficulty that the report differed widely from his actual words, and there the incident ended.

But Verdi wrote: 'You say, "I may and I may not finish *Nerone*". I repeat your words and apply them to *Otello*. It has been talked about too much and has taken too long already. I am too old. The public may say "enough!" Besides, all this has chilled and stiffened the hand that had begun to write a few bars.'

When at last the score was completed, the search began for suitable performers. Some gave little difficulty: Maurel was clearly indicated for the part of Iago; the two women's parts—not exceptionally exacting could also be adequately filled without a far search. But the protagonist—where was to be found the ideal tenor equally suited to the heroic and lyrical styles, who could voice the exultation of the first triumphant entry, Othello's anger and anguish, the melting loveliness of the meeting with Desdemona, and the pathos of the last speech? There was only one singer who seemed equal to the task—Tamagno, but with all his natural gifts he lacked intelligence. Well taught, he could accomplish anything; in the interpretation of Rossini's *William Tell*, for instance, he excelled over any other singer not only in wealth and power of tone but also in dignity and passion. But the finer points of music had to be explained to him slowly and laboriously. Not a born interpreter, he could only assimilate and retain his lesson after careful and long tuition. His parsimonious habits explain the last part of a letter which Verdi wrote to Ricordi (November 4, 1886) about him:

'Even after Tamagno has learnt the music, there will be a good deal to do in the way of interpretation and expression. I shall have to say things to your 5,000 lire tenor that are quite unnecessary for the others, and that may wound his *amour-propre* and his susceptibilities, especially when Maurel is present. This kind of thing makes for bad humour; ill-natured words follow and then one never knows how it will end. We must avoid this pitfall at all costs. But what can one do?

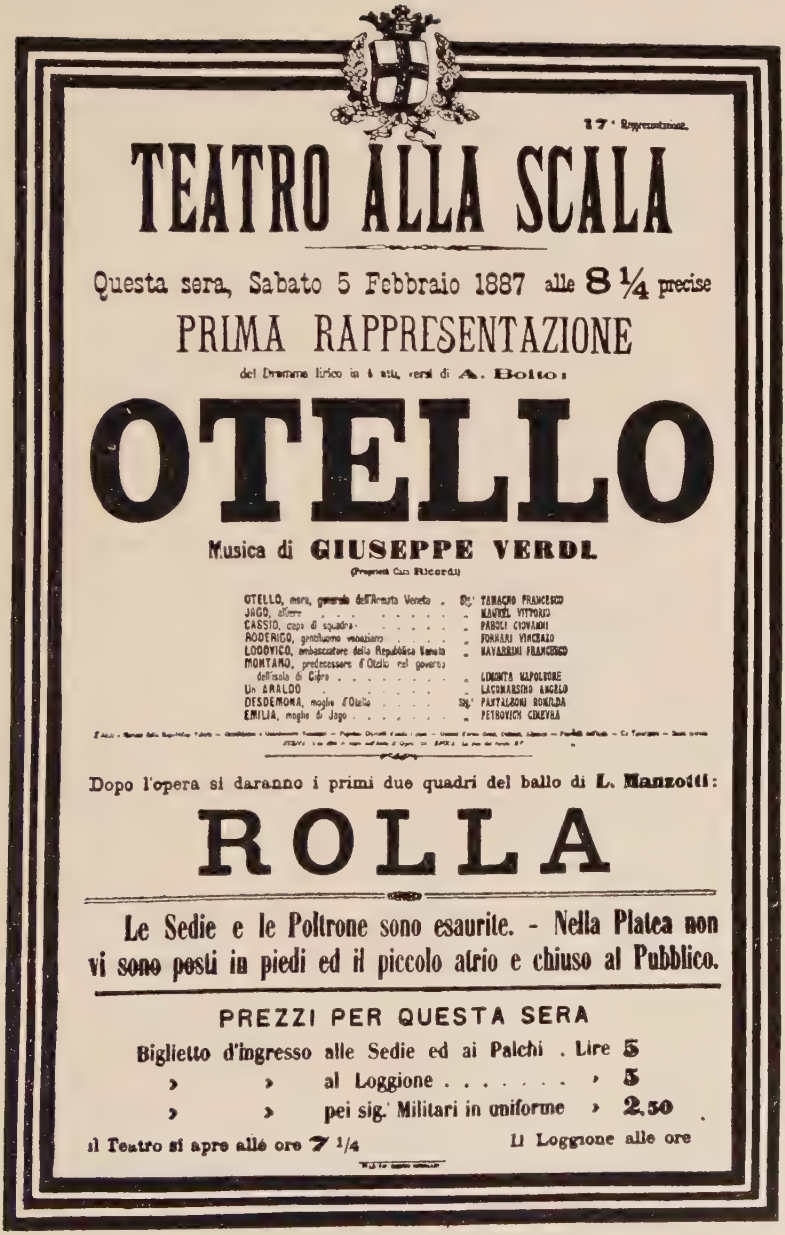
'If the season were not so far advanced I might ask him to come here. But how should we pass the time? I could not make him sing the whole day long, and after working for a couple of hours he would be on my hands. I should have to entertain him, talk to him, play billiards or stroll about with him, which would tire me, and just now I cannot do it. It would be quite impossible.

'Another alternative would be to ask him to Genoa, anticipating our arrival by getting there on the 15th or 20th of this month. Tamagno could learn the rôle with Faccio, and then come on to Genoa on the 20th. He might find rooms at the Londra or the Milano and come to me at noon for a couple of hours' work; then he could go for a walk and return at six for a meal with us. After a cup of coffee and a cigar we could revise the morning's work. This would be an excellent plan, but I dare not suggest it to him. I have not the courage to ask him to spend a hundred lire after seeing him travel second class with his daughter on this very line between Genoa and Milan.'

Verdi's alternative was accepted and the rehearsals began.

Otello was given for the first time at the Scala, Milan, on February 5, 1887, and its success was immediate and unanimous. The opera represents the goal of a lifetime of great endeavours; ideals and technique have reached the point where they work in perfect harmony together, where theory and practice are at one. The theory remains essentially the same. The singer, the visible hero of the drama, still retains the first place, but with this important qualification, that his pre-eminence is not that of a virtuoso but that of the protagonist in a drama. No opportunity is given him for display of vituosity; no arias or cabalettas are assigned to him. He takes his place in the play and claims our interest only because the play depends for its development on his action. The style of the music remains essentially melodic—that is to say, the greatest burden of the expression falls on one line of music—but the melody is no longer of a formal design. It has acquired greater subtlety, greater power of expression and adaptability; the music is not joined to the words but lies at their very core. Poetry and music are inseparable, and when we substitute any other text—as must happen when Boito's words are translated—that union is severed. The English translator who adapted Shakespeare's own words to Verdi's music did his work with ingenuity: yet he is unfair both to Shakespeare and Verdi, for the accent of the music is distorted out of love for Shakespeare, while Shakespeare's verse not seldom fits the music as a mangled body fits the rack.

The harmonic parts which complete the musical texture remain subsidiary to the melody, but they are not the humble, overworked assistants of *Trovatore*. They have acquired independence and responsibilities. Instead of a pattern which, with modifications, might serve different occasions, every element of the design has a clearly defined purpose; not a note could be added or subtracted without materially altering the balance of the structure and weakening a melody solidly welded to its accompaniment. Musically and dramatically *Otello* is nearer to *L'Incoronazione di Poppea* than any Italian opera written after Monteverde. The style, of course, is that of the later nineteenth century; but Verdi, without a definite programme and without set purpose, realized through common sense and artistic genius the ideals of the later Monteverde, even thought he began from the opposite end. Monteverde's *Orfeo* conceded nothing to popular taste while the early Verdian opera conceded everything. *Poppea* on the other hand implied a recognition that certain popular elements discreetly and skilfully used might be employed without imperilling the drama. Similarly in *Otello* lyrical expression, as distinguished from dramatic, is allowed a certain freedom, but only when its employment is perfectly legitimate.

Some of the early critics of *Otello* praised the force and point of its dramatic style, but took exception to the lyrical parts, which seemed to

17ª Rappresentazione.

TEATRO ALLA SCALA

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PRIMA RAPPRESENTAZIONE

del Dramma lirico in 4 atti, versi di **A. Boito:**

OTELLO

Musica di GIUSEPPE VERDI

(Proprietà Casa Ricordi)

OTELLO, moro, generale dell'Armata Veneta	.	Sig.r TAMAGNO FRANCESCO
IAGO, alfiere	.	MANFREDI VITTORIO
CASSIO, capo di squadra	.	PARODI GIOVANNI
RODERIGO, gentiluomo veneziano	.	FORNARI VINCENZO
LODOVICO, ambasciatore della Repubblica Veneta	.	NAVARRINI FRANCESCO
MONTANO, predecessore d'Otello nel governo dell'isola di Cipro	.	LOMBARDI NAPOLEONE
UN ARALDO	.	LACONARESCO ANGELO
DESDEMONA, moglie d'Otello	.	Sig.a FANTALONI ROMILDA
EMILIA, moglie di Iago	.	PETROVICH CLOTILDE

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Poster of the first performance of Otello

hinder the development of the action. Lyrical expression—it must be admitted—invariably retards action. Yet drama consists not merely of action, but of character as well, which lyrical expression may often present under a new aspect. Othello's farewell to the 'pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war'—most frequently quoted as an unwarranted break of dramatic continuity—has a definite purpose, to show how Othello's mind is affected by Iago's plotting, how all that Othello loves best in the past is shattered by the knowledge of Desdemona's supposed treachery. It is lyrical poetry in the original, and could only be rendered by lyrical music. We understand the action all the better because Othello having looked for a moment into his mind gives expression to the gathering darkness.

In his use of the chorus Verdi is as restrained and reasonable as in the use of lyricism. The opera chorus was perhaps derived originally from the chorus of Greek tragedy. But the conditions of opera made it impossible that the copy should resemble the original, and the choragus had to be sacrificed. Choral singing with its divisions and subdivisions of parts seemed unfitted for comment and for lyrical relief. The chorus could never compete on equal terms with the soloist; the contrast between solo-singing and massed singing, effective enough from the standpoint of the musician and of the showman, often proved absurd from that of the dramatist. The niceties of theatrical art could not be expected from the least important and most inadequately trained members of the company. Combined action moreover reduces every stage picture to the level of a military pageant. A gesture repeated simultaneously by a hundred men and women raises in itself an almost insoluble problem of stage technique.

For these and other reasons Wagner was induced to discard the chorus in some of his operas, returning to it however in later works. Verdi, who never deliberately brushed aside old customs unless convinced of their worthlessness and ineptitude, used the chorus in all his operas. But while the chorus of the early works is entirely conventional in *Otello* and in *Falstaff* the occasion for it is prepared with some care. In the first scenes of *Otello* the chorus is important to the action and takes the place of the 'four gentlemen' in the corresponding Shakespearian scenes; later, singing round the bonfire, it may be dramatically unessential, but it helps to bridge the inevitable interval between Othello's arrival and the quarrel of Cassio with Montano. It is perfectly natural that the people of Cyprus should celebrate the victory by lighting fires in the open. The chorus is at hand to add colour and weight to the quarrel which ends with Othello's re-entry. In the other acts the chorus is used twice—once for the serenade sung to Desdemona (and this can only be resented when the chorus is so numerous as to suggest a choral society's rehearsal rather than a Cyprian serenade); and later as the suite of the Venetian ambassador.

Doubtless Boito was mainly responsible for these arrangements. But Verdi, who never hesitated to criticize details, however small, when they did not coincide with his own ideas, was in complete agreement with Boito. Iago's monologue in the second act is, of course, Boito's own idea. Verdi accepted it, although he feared that critics—and particularly Shakespeare's countrymen—might resent the interpolation. Its origin may perhaps be traced to a first tentative plan for the opera which was to have been named not after the hero but after the villain, in which the general intention was to develop the character of Othello's ancient. The monologue, if it lacks Shakespearian authority, is well in keeping with the conception of Iago as the 'Spartan dog, more fell than anguish, hunger, or the sea'. Boito's error has been held to be his failure to give sufficient reason for Iago's actions by ignoring the intrigue between Othello and Iago's wife. Shakespeare's Iago, however, says that 'it is thought abroad' that such an intrigue existed, and continues:

> . . . I know not if't be true,
> But I, for mere suspicion in that kind,
> Will do as if for surety.
> . . . Hell and night
> Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light.

This is Boito's justification. In any case, the very distinguished if super-subtle critics who have taken up cudgels for Iago have gone too far. He is trusted, they say, and known as 'honest Iago'. Why, his plot could never succeed unless he had first, with unparalleled hypocrisy, deceived and prevailed upon others to trust him.

> The Moor is of a free and open nature,
> That thinks men honest that but seem to be so,

says Iago in his monologue, and there is not the slightest reason why we should doubt that he had had long experience of Othello's credulity. Iago, it is said, was a brave, bluff soldier. As we have mainly his own word for bravery, we need more reliable testimony before trusting one who believes in 'the baseness of our natures', which 'scorns the very name of virtue' ('Virtue! a fig! 'tis in ourselves that we are thus, or thus'), and holds that Desdemona must be won by wealth. He urges Roderigo repeatedly to 'put money in thy purse', trust to that and invoke the aid of 'all the tribe of hell'. The brave, bluff soldier hates Cassio as much as he hates Othello yet does not meet either. When at last he is forced to attack Cassio he conceals himself, attacks him from behind, and even then bungles the job so that instead of killing, as he meant, he only wounds his adversary. In any case the monologue is so little the 'pivot of Verdi's *Otello*' that it could be omitted without any loss to the action. It is generally held that the perfect libretto can be written only by the composer himself. We may doubt whether this is as practical as

it is obviously desirable. It seems too much to expect that the same man should be a master of poetry in no less degree than of music. There is the record of one composer who found his own libretto so good as poetry that he no longer wished to add to it musical sounds. We may also presume in the twofold artist moments in which the sway of one instinct is stronger than the other, resulting in fine words and poor music or indifferent poetry for music of great beauty.

In default of the superman, it becomes imperative to secure such a complete understanding between composer and librettist as existed between Verdi and Boito. Words and music in *Otello* and *Falstaff* are one as surely as if they had been written by the same hand.

The libretto of *Otello* is easily the best in all Italian opera present and past. Its literary merit—which is great—and the skill and ingenuity of the translation are less our concern than Boito's treatment of the Shakespearian text. The adaptation of any drama for music is a difficult task of condensation, excision, reconstruction, but Boito's was the more exacting since *Othello* is vigorously logical ('a simple situation worked out step by step'); with an action that is continuous, and an interest that is cumulative. Any excision by a less able artist might have meant irreparable loss.

With exceptional skill Boito possessed also exceptional courage, and he showed it by the omission of a first act, which might almost have been written with an eye to musical composition. Only a few phrases are incorporated in the love duet. Yet, in the opera, each act is complete within its framework, each takes us a step nearer to the catastrophe.

There are themes, but no 'leading themes', in the music. Even the plan of a theme connected with the chief character, as used in *Aïda*, has been abandoned. The motif system suited Wagner well, in the first place because he was a symphonic writer, for whom variation (the presentation of a theme in different guises) is an essential element of form; in the second place, because his action, centring generally round a few motifs which reappear under different aspects, fits perfectly his musical form. Verdi's acts never exceed a determined period of time and they contain many incidents. In *Otello*, an opera of rapid action and tempestuous passions, there is little opportunity and no necessity for leading themes.

In the great love duet which closes the first act Othello and Desdemona have not one but a dozen phrases of great beauty, every one as different as the thoughts that pass through their mind as they recall the beginning and the progress of their love. Only at the end, as Othello kisses Desdemona, the one theme is heard which will be heard again at the end of the opera when Othello dies 'upon a kiss'. The phrase which accompanies Iago's 'Beware, my lord, of jealousy' reappears in the prelude to the third act as if to intimate that the 'green-ey'd monster' is at work and Othello in its toils.

But there is no systematic exploitation of motifs. The psychology of the characters does not rest on system, but on the aptitude and efficacy of the musical expression. Desdemona's innocence, Othello's noble simplicity, Iago's crookedness—these are made as plain in every note of music as in every line of Shakespeare. Not a bar but reveals the felicity of a musical treatment in which melody is still supreme as it was in the operas which delighted Soffredini. Verdi was never more melodious than in *Otello*; but this time in a way that fits perfectly a simple or a complex situation, and portrays with equal force and truth innocence and villainy, love and hatred.

Let us glance for a moment at one of the best known pages of the opera—Iago's dream. No oddity of rhythm breaks the course of the melody, no exotic harmony stresses its salient points. Yet it follows every inflexion, every accent, every suggestion of the narrative as closely as the river follows its bank. It represents the dreamer's murmurs as clearly as his imagined ecstasy; it stresses the word 'Moor' which hurts Othello most deeply; it marks the end of the vision with a sudden jerk like the stirring of a sleeper; it melts away finally as dreams melt and Othello's first words are soft as if he himself were still under the spell of the awful dream. Only after Iago has produced the handkerchief does Othello's anger break out with full force.

In the last act the need for psychological development no longer exists. Othello is in the grip of a passion as untamable as the sea, and the other characters have reached the point when they are ripe for the last tragic deed. Desdemona stands condemned after Othello has gathered his proofs, to be crushed under the weight of his anger. But the poetry needed to temper the horror of the whole of the last act wells up in the Willow Song as in the last scene of death and sorrow—more briefly but not with less dramatic point than in Isolda's closing song—the last as characteristic of the German as *Otello* is of the Italian genius. That ending to the opera I hold to be even more moving, if less terrible, than that to the play. It recalls the end of the love scene, and brings together the two great mysteries of existence, love and death.

Miracle though it may appear that one of the three greatest comedies in music—*The Barber of Seville*, *Meistersinger*, and *Falstaff*—should have been written by a man of eighty, yet *Falstaff* could only have been written by one who combined with exceptional youthful vigour the philosophic outlook that comes of ripe years and vast experience.

With all his natural kindness and practical generosity, Verdi was never pre-eminently a lover of his fellow men. To a few he gave his friendship without reserve. With the majority he was generally courteous and generous; but what he had seen of the world was hardly likely to encourage optimism. As his life and his career were drawing to a close he did not altogether alter his opinions, but he seems to have discovered

that men are seldom as bad as they seem; that evidence is seldom conclusive, and judgement often fallible. His imagination, attracted before by tragic errors, is now kindled by a story in which not one of the characters is either wise or despicable. *Falstaff* differs from *Meistersinger* and *The Barber of Seville* in not having a Beckmesser or a Don Basilio. All the characters of *Falstaff* act foolishly—'tutti gabbati'—but at the end no one is left to cast a stone or propound a moral. The conclusion drawn by the authors is that the world must not be taken too seriously—we are not only players but jesters. In the final scene of Verdi's last opera the actors advance to the footlights and there proclaim that 'everything in the world is jest'—on a theme which the composer had heard sung by some children at play. That is Verdi's good-bye to the theatre and to life: after the tragedies, the philosophy of Merry Andrew and the tune of a child.

There is not a hint of serious purpose or of malice in this opera. Jealousy, shattering in *Otello*, becomes merely ludicrous in *Falstaff*. Sir John's roguery is but the source of wit, since from the first he is outplayed, outmanœuvred, outfooled by his opponents. Ford is a typical figure of comedy—the jealous fool; Page is the blind fool who could not see danger if danger were there. Bardolph, whose burning nose lights the way at night, is the good-natured fool, and Pistol the swaggering fool —all buts for quick-witted, resourceful women. Through plot and counter-plot an idyll threads its way, all the more exquisite for the contrast it strikes with the robust humour of the comedy. On Anne Page and John Fenton Verdi has lavished the affection which the old keep for those about to enter the long road they themselves have left behind; for them he wrote the last and sweetest of his love songs.

We meet a new element in *Falstaff*—the fantastic, in the fairy music in Windsor Forest—conjuring up a delicate and fanciful picture (which probably Verdi had never seen) of an English park by moonlight as the mists rise. There is also a hint of impressionism in the close of the first and the beginning of the second part of the third act. As the stage is emptied and we are left with the echoes of the laughter, the music paints silence.

The method in the main is that of *Otello*—as successful in comedy as before in tragedy. There is no motif to identify any of the characters. The themes change as the situation changes and the events show the actors in a new light. Descriptive music is used far more extensively than in any other opera of Verdi, and this has been made the ground for a charge of imitating foreign models. But descriptive and imitative music is not the prerogative of any particular country or school. Excellent examples are found in Pergolesi, to go no farther afield; our concern is rather the use that is made of it; we must praise these artifices if ably and blame them if clumsily used. No one can question the skill of *Falstaff* or the deftness and aptitude of its thematic material. A single

instance will suffice. After Falstaff has disclosed his appointment with Mistress Ford to her husband, who in disguise is left alone nursing his wrath, the musical counterpart to Falstaff's 'I'll give him cuckold' forms the accompaniment of the ensuing monologue. That is the idea in Ford's mind; those are the words that madden him; as he plots and plans to foil Falstaff every thought is urged forward by that rhythm. Here, as in the few bars of peroration (which recall another phrase sung but a little while before, 'There are those who say a jealous husband is a fool'), the orchestra takes on greater importance as it fills in the details of the picture. Nor is this a new departure; the device is seen in embryo in *Rigoletto*; it is used again in *Traviata*, *Aïda*, and of course in *Otello*.

Ford's monologue may well be considered one of the gems of the opera; from the first cry of rage to the mock solemnity of the last praise of jealousy, it is a succession of happy strokes. But the whole score abounds in brilliant devices of wit (as far as wit can be represented in music) alternating with ensemble pieces of most exquisite grace, such as the women's quartet of the first act. Fenton's song and the ineffable sweetness of the love duet, the fairy music and the last fugue—these make for a contentment too profound for laughter.

In the third act there is a touch of artificiality which adds to rather than detracts from the fascination of the comedy, when the plotters, listening to the dialogue between Falstaff and Mistress Quickly, close towards the wings in the old stage manner. The fugue too, at the end of the opera, may be described as conventional. Both are perfectly in their place. The first is a reminder that this merry adventure is art, not life; that latitude is allowed to the comedian which would be unseemly in the tragedian. The other makes the actors throw down the mask and come to us no longer as comedians, but to sing and make merry with us: Plaudite comoedia finita est.

Falstaff is too intimate for a vast theatre. Its fine flavour is lost unless the closest contact is maintained between the audience and the stage. A mediocre company, well trained, and acting with spirit, can take us to the heart of its music more quickly than a hastily assembled company of distinguished singers.

Those who have gone so far as to suggest that Verdi never meant *Falstaff* for the theatre rest their case on the flimsiest foundations. When engaged on *Falstaff*, no less than when working on *Otello*, Verdi was anxious not to bind himself, and above all not to be worried by news hunters. To those who asked him for information, in his inability to reply with a negative, he said that he was writing for his own amusement 'without definite intentions'. He had been equally elusive before. In any case the score is an unanswerable argument against the supposition that *Falstaff* was not meant for the theatre, for no composer would score for full orchestra a work intended primarily for the drawing-

room. What he did feel from the first was that a great theatre is as unfit a home for comic opera as for comedy. In June 1891, while refusing to discuss plans, he admitted that the composition of *Falstaff* was proceeding very slowly, adding 'Six or seven months ago no one thought at all about either *Falstaff* or the venerable old man of Sant'Agata. . . . This is not the moment to discuss it . . . but I become more and more convinced that the vastness of the Scala would spoil its effect. I have been writing for my own pleasure and for personal reasons, and I believe that instead of the Scala it should be given at Sant' Agata'. But he was charmed with Boito's libretto—it was the one libretto he accepted without a single alteration—and the character of Falstaff delighted him. 'He is a bad lot . . . but he is a character!' and the work proceeded. 'When I was young'—he wrote to Ricordi—'although ill a good deal, I could sit down and work for ten or twelve hours a day, and I have often worked from four a.m. to four p.m. with only a cup of coffee to sustain me. Now I cannot do it. . . . It is best to tell everybody now and later on that I cannot and do not want to make the least possible promise. . . . If it is to be, it will be.'

By the autumn of 1892 the score was ready and the parts in the hands of the singers. *Falstaff* was produced on February 9, 1893, at the Scala theatre, in spite of Verdi's fears that the house would prove unsuitable for the gossamer threads of his music. Its success was anticipated by royalties who, unable to be present sent good wishes; it was acclaimed by a crowd of distinguished musicians from every part of Europe; it was followed by the offer of a title which Verdi bluntly refused. A tour was undertaken of all the most important European centres and for a while nothing but good news reached Sant'Agata. Soon, however, intrigues in the company and the business of engaging new performers cast a shadow on the pleasure Verdi had derived from his last triumph. He wrote to the conductor, Mascheroni: 'Do you think any one could be a musician or conductor, and not have to feed on his own heart, every day consuming a little for breakfast, a little for dinner, always reserving some for tomorrow?' Another cause of disappointment was the growing realization that the great public did not show the same enthusiasm for *Falstaff* as for *Aïda* and *Otello*. 'I am very prosaic in some things'—he wrote to Mascheroni—'and regard the box-office as the only infallible thermometer.' And the box-office receipts for *Falstaff* never equalled those of other operas. Verdi knew, moreover, that he had written his last opera. To Mme Zilli, who first sang the part of Alice in *Falstaff*, he wrote:

'A year has gone since the time of the first rehearsals. That was a time of enthusiasm . . . with moments of happiness; and also—do you recall what happened after the third performance? I said good-bye to you and you were all a little moved, especially you and Mme Pasqua . . . how much love was in that good-bye for me, to whom it meant that as

collaborators we should never meet again! We have met since at Milan, at Genoa, at Rome; but my thoughts have always gone back to that third night which spelled: The end has come!'

In the years that passed between the first performance of *Aïda* and the composition of *Otello*, and again in the interval between *Otello* and *Falstaff*, Verdi was still strong and active. Now he knew he would never again be equal to the strain of writing opera.

His mind and his genius were still alive. A flicker perhaps where once there had been a great flame; but the short pieces he wrote in the last years of his life deserve more attention than they have received. The *Ave Maria* on the 'enigmatic scale'[12] has greater beauty than academic experiments are wont to have. More spiritual is the charm of the *Laudi alla Vergine Maria*, a setting of some lines from Canto XXXIII of Dante's 'Paradiso'. The *Stabat Mater* and the *Te Deum* stand somewhat apart. The last Verdi meant to be an interpretation of the text different entirely from commonly accepted views. This hymn, he maintained, is usually heard on the occasion of solemn festivities, when a king is crowned or a victory celebrated. and the opening sentences of the text justify this reading. But towards the end, the expression and colour of the words change: '*Tu ad liberandum* . . . it is Christ who, born of the Virgin, opens to mankind *regnum coelorum*; . . . Men believe in the *Judex venturus* and appeal to Him: *Salvum fac*; . . . the end '*Dignare Domine die isto*', is a prayer, moving, dark, sad, even terrifying.'

The *Te Deum*, like the *Stabat Mater*, marks a return not to old forms but to old idioms. The drama of the subject called forth symbols that had served him long and well; but while the design is the same, the pace of the music is somewhat slower, the expression more gentle; there is greater economy of means, greater refinement; the idiom is the same, the spirit is chastened and saddened. Verdi had reasons for sadness. Less than a year before the four religious settings were performed (1898), Giuseppina Strepponi had died, and the old man was left alone to wander aimlessly through the house murmuring to himself, 'Poor Peppina is no more'. His heart began to trouble him slightly; and although physicians found his body as healthy as that of a comparatively young man, he now felt the loneliness of old age. There was no one left who had known him in the days of his early struggles; no one to whom he could talk of Merelli and Solera, or to listen to him if he wished to discuss music or politics perhaps, Rossini who thought him unable to write a comic opera, or the Minister of Education who declared that after Rossini the world had only been enriched by four operas—all by Meyerbeer. Of the great men with whom he had been intimate, only Boito was left; he did not meet the musicians of the younger generation.

When King Humbert was murdered the widowed Queen wrote a

[12] C, D flat, E, F sharp, G sharp, A sharp, B, C.

prayer, and the simplicity and sincerity of those words kindled in Verdi for the last time the desire to compose. When someone suggested that he should set it to music he protested that illness and old age forbade him to work. A brief sketch was found—the last sketch of all—among his posthumous papers.

In January 1900 Verdi went to Milan. He was rising from bed one morning when he had a seizure. Though he lingered on for some days he never spoke again. The agony lasted until the 27th when in the early hours of the morning he died peacefully. Boito, who was with him long and often, wrote afterwards:

'He has gone, and has carried with him a large share of light and vital warmth, for the world was sunned by that olympic old age. He died magnificently like a dumb but pertinacious fighter. With bent head and rugged eyebrows he seemed to take the measure of his unknown, formidable adversary and to reckon the force needed to withstand it. Thus he resisted heroically, to the last. In my lifetime, I have lost those I idolized, and sorrow has outlived resignation. But I never felt before such hatred against death and such contempt for its mysterious, blind, stupid, triumphant, infamous power.'

Thus died one who had in him more of the true essence of greatness and less of its outward signs than most men whom we reckon great.

12

Character and Genius

A RECENT biographer of Verdi puts forward the suggestion that in his occasionally brusque manner, in his studied avoidance of 'society', he betrayed his peasant origin. It is difficult to see any grounds for this. If Verdi had been and remained to the end of his life a peasant in mind and manners, with a gift for writing music, it would be possible to imagine him overawed by unfamiliar customs, suffering from a sense of inferiority. But what evidence we have points to his possessing from his earliest years the sense and sensibility, the qualities of heart and mind, which single out a man and mark him as a leader. At the start they are not to be easily detected, although some people seem to recognize greatness in a man before he gives any obvious sign of it. Antonio Barezzi, who took Verdi into his family, was one of them; the priest who taught Verdi Latin and the organist who taught him music realized in a moment their pupil's unusual capacity and lively imagination. To this company must be added the names of his first impresario, Merelli, and of Giuseppina Strepponi. Verdi impressed them all with the latent powers of his mind. Boito, who opposed Verdi at first and for many years ignored him, ended by declaring that of all the famous men he had known, Verdi was the greatest.

If to make the laws of the country or to lead its armies is a greater title to honour than to make its songs, there were greater men than Verdi among those he himself admired. But in character he was surpassed by none. Verdi had few friends and not one of them—not even his devoted Peppina—ever penetrated to his inner heart's core. He was as lonely among the children of the Busseto peasants as among men of the world. He had no share in their lives nor they in his. There is in this no rudeness, no boorishness, no trace of peasant origin; only evidence that he did not suffer fools gladly, that he had little patience with the arrogance of self-appointed critics of life and manners, that although he conceived himself to be a servant of the public he did not accept its verdict.

Who would dare to maintain that he was wrong in holding aloof from society? Not a few modern artists of uncommon promise have forfeited their birthright because they have been unable to resist the shallow attractions of association with men and women with whom they had no community of interests or intellectual kinship. Giuseppina Strepponi described him perfectly when she said that he was 'an iron nature who

yet understood the most delicate as well as the most inspiring sentiment'. Delicacy of sentiment needs a shield if it is not to end in despair; an iron will, an iron nature are the natural protectors of fine sensibility. It is not too far-fetched to suggest that but for this sensitiveness he could not, almost at the end of his career, have fallen in love with Desdemona as he had before with Cordelia—for such was the passion which held him when he set himself to re-create these characters in music. 'Genius', said Buffon, 'is the repeated effort of thinking; it does not come by inspiration but is the working of a powerful mind applied to a particular subject.' The definition admirable for scientists, applies partially to the creative artist, with the qualification that the impulse to thought must come from an imagination already on fire with some idea, or from concentrated will-power.

The 'iron nature' comes out in the voluminous business letters. Verdi writes not as merchants do to-day but as we imagine merchants did in an age of golden honesty. The composer becomes the plain dealer who dislikes long words and sentences and is utterly unable to understand artistic vagaries or the backslidings of a mere poet. He might indeed be described in the words Francis Osbaldistone uses to describe his father:

'His wealth has accumulated because, modest and frugal in his habits, no new sources of expense have occurred to dispose of his increasing income. He is a man who hates dissimulation in others, never practises it himself, and is peculiarly alert in discovering motives through the colouring of language. Himself silent by habit, he is readily disgusted by great talkers. . . . He will fail in his duty to no one and will permit no one to fail towards him.'

This sense of directness was not limited to dealings with poets and editors; it is as easily detected in music which knows no subterfuge and has no hidden meaning, but goes directly to the point. From *Conte Oberto* to *Falstaff* Verdi was never swayed by fashions and theories, but held fast to Polonius's advice to Laertes 'to thine own self be true'. Not once but a hundred times, when critics were vaunting the superior skill or beauty of foreign music, he pointed out the absurdity of adopting a method foreign to himself simply because it suited someone else. In this conservatism is rooted the character of Verdi's music which differentiates it from that of others.

He had no conceit; he never asked for honour or reward not strictly due to him. If he refused less than his due, he was equally determined to refuse more than he considered fair or honourable; he rejected with scorn the offer of a title, not because he held that titles were contemptible, but because he was convinced that his own nobility—the nobility that had stood the test of a lifetime—was the better of the two. He was far from underrating worth when he found it; and the fact that Clarina

Maffei was a countess and Arrivabene a count did not affect Verdi's friendship for them.

For all his impetuosity he did not easily take offence, and his replies to those who had offended him show not only forgiveness but generosity, a sense of fitness and justice that men trained from the cradle in the arts of courtesy could not have bettered. When he thought Boito had accused him of defiling 'the altar of Italian art', Verdi answered with exemplary moderation. When Hans von Bülow apologized for his attack on the *Requiem*, written while 'his mind was blinded by partisanship', Verdi answered him thus:

'There is not a shadow of offence in you, and therefore you have no occasion to speak of repentance and absolution. If your opinions were once other than they are to-day you were perfectly right in making them known—I would never have complained. And perhaps—who knows?—you were not mistaken then. But whatever the truth, your unexpected letter, coming from a musician of your worth and importance in the artistic world, has given me great pleasure—not out of personal vanity but because I see that true artists are above the prejudices of schools or nations or periods.'

'Above prejudice'—there is the very heart of the man who, himself a passionate lover of justice and fairness, suffered more than most from the bias of those whose ill nature so outweighs their goodwill that when they honour one they must decry all others.

In the criticism of his contemporaries there is never any animosity, though at times a touch of bitterness. Verdi resented particularly the treatment meted out to musicians who after a lifetime of neglect found a crown in death. When Berlioz died, he wrote to Arrivabene (1882):

'Berlioz was suffering from disease and was angry with everybody; a bitter and malicious man, with a great and keen intellect, who had a genius for the orchestra and in orchestral effects blazed the trail for Wagner (the Wagnerians will not admit it, but it is true). He lacked moderation; he lacked the calm, the equilibrium which lead to the complete work of art.

'His present success in Paris is a well-deserved stroke of justice—but reaction is partly responsible for it. He was ill-treated while he lived and now that he is dead—"Hosanna!".'

In one of his few reported witticisms, he refers to Berlioz: 'A great artist but an eccentric; he would have abused his own work if by doing so he could have annoyed someone.'

How shrewd a judge he could be of men we have seen in the letters on the political situation already quoted. He was not less penetrating in his verdicts on contemporary music. He summed up *Cavalleria Rusticana* as a piece of remarkable sincerity; but when he heard the operas with which Mascagni followed his first happy venture, he declared that

Mascagni had missed the right path. His comment on Puccini, based on hearsay, has no value as criticism, but some phrases deserve notice.

'Puccini', he wrote, 'is right in following modern tendencies and yet keeping to the melodic style which is neither modern nor ancient. It seems that in him the symphonic element predominates. There is nothing wrong in this, but one should be careful: opera is opera and symphony is symphony. It does not seem desirable to introduce a symphonic movement solely in order to make the orchestra dance.'

The last phrase should not be interpreted as a gibe at Wagner's methods. Again and again he affirms that what is perfectly proper for, indeed a source of strength in, a German may be unsuitable and a source of weakness in an Italian. He appreciated as no one else did the influence of environment and tradition on racial instinct, and he censured Italians who aped German ways in music just as he deprecated foreign customs assumed to gain easy notoriety.

He did not defend himself against the Italian Wagnerians when they began a campaign with an imperfect knowledge of Verdi and a still more imperfect knowledge of Wagner.

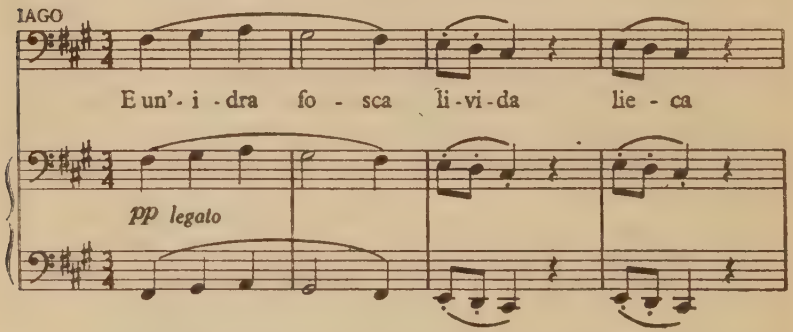
The campaign opened with the performance of *Lohengrin* at Bologna in 1871. The success was magnified into a triumph by the partisanship and rivalry of two factions. The Italian rights of *Lohengrin* were vested in the publisher Lucca—the rival of Verdi's publisher Ricordi; while Bologna set up as a rival to Milan as the stronghold of the 'music of the future'. But the Wagnerian champions had chosen their ground badly. *Lohengrin* is the weakest of Wagner's three early operas. It has pages which equal but do not surpass the best of *Tannhäuser* and *The Flying Dutchman*; but its technique—both musical and dramatic—is distinctly weaker. The very excellence of the first act of *Lohengrin* contributes to its weakness on the stage since the interest decreases as the work proceeds; the love duet in the third act never rises to the glowing heat of the meeting of Tannhäuser and Elizabeth not to the tense moment when Senta first sees her hero. Yet this opera was chosen to demonstrate Wagner's greatness.

The performance was preceded by articles which, purporting to explain, were successful in advertising the 'new' art. Verdi, who abhorred publicity of all kind, deprecated this novel way of preparing the public for an artistic event. The public was not so squeamish about advertisement; it was also more gullible, and Bologna gave to *Lohengrin* praises that would have better fitted *Tristan* or *The Ring*. On the other hand there were admirers of Verdi who would have thought it an act of cowardice not to reply to the Wagnerians in the same tone and with the same lack of measure and proportion.

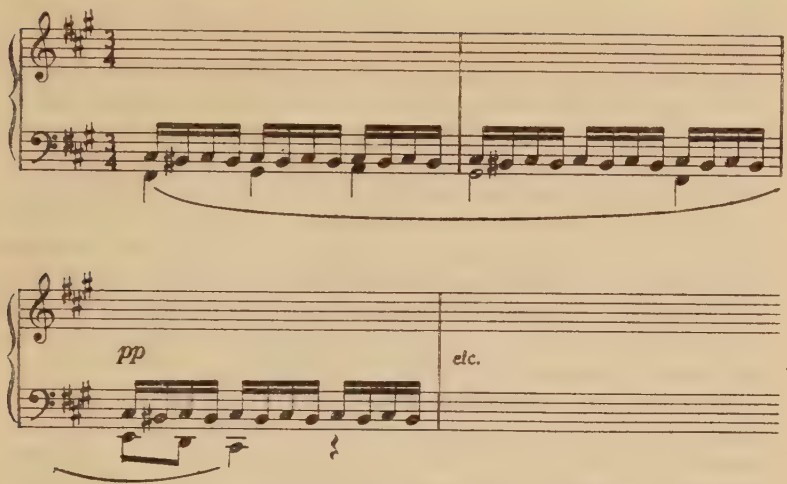
Verdi kept well outside the ring while the battle of words went on. Moved by curiosity, he went to Bologna and heard *Lohengrin*, following

the music with the score. His impressions are written in pencil on the margins of the printed page, which can still be seen amongst the relics at Sant' Agata. Unfortunately some of the remarks are illegible, but Signor Lualdi in his *Viaggio Musicale in Italia* has given us all that matters. Verdi often confines himself to adjectives qualifying the music and sometimes the performance, which he found fell far short of the perfection that enthusiastic Wagnerians claimed for it. He defines as 'beautiful' the entrance of Elsa and the vivace which follows her invocation; the concluding episode, however, was 'badly performed; a real mess'. As Lualdi justly remarks, Verdi takes care to discriminate between failings in the music and imperfections in the execution, which is what a prejudiced man would never have done. At the end he writes: 'Mediocre impression—the music is beautiful when clear and thoughtful—the action moves slowly and also the dialogue—hence ennui; fine instrumental effects—the abuse of long held notes gives an effect of heaviness; mediocre performance—much spirit but no poetry or finesse; sadly deficient at difficult points.' Such opinions might well have been expressed to-day by any impartial critic. 'The long-held notes after the manner of the organ' I take to mean the long cords for wood-wind (occasionally reinforced by brass)—an obvious source of weakness which disappears in the later Wagnerian scores, where wood and brass have acquired the same freedom of movement as the strings.

Verdi never uses leading themes in the Wagnerian manner. He does however use themes to identify characters or describe a mood: In *Otello*, Iago's description of jealousy in Act II.



becomes the subject of the prelude to Act III with the obvious purpose of showing Othello 'not easily jealous—but, being wrought, perplex'd in the extreme'.



Elsewhere Verdi speaks of Wagner as a man whose genius he respected and admired but whose opinions he did not share. He was very anxious at first that the orchestra should be hidden from sight, including 'the conductor's windmill'. Later on he saw difficulties and believed the matter to be less urgent than was generally thought. In suggesting the concealed orchestra to Ricordi (1871) he particularly states that the notion is not his, but Wagner's. Twenty years later he thought the matter comparatively unimportant, especially since the modifications that had been made at Hamburg and Berlin seemed to him but a partial solution of the problem. When he was asked for his opinion on the advisability of preparing a pit for the orchestra at the Scala he put forward objections—the probability that the wall of the under stage might re-echo and add strength to the brass, the unsightliness of a row of double-bass scrolls rising above the orchestra, the impossibility of hiding the conductor 'with that stick of his always in motion'.

The decision has now gone in favour of the Wagnerian principle. But it may be worth remarking that the innovation, if essential to Wagnerian opera where the tone of the orchestra is apt otherwise to overwhelm the singer, remains a questionable advantage to Verdian opera where the orchestral tone has always the closest relation to the voice. When the texture is thin or the orchestra not sufficiently numerous the sunken orchestra cannot easily be heard up-stage and may be a cause of faulty intonation.

If Verdi felt the injustice meted out to Berlioz he was no less indignant at the reception of Wagner by the Parisians. The announcement of Wagner's death left him sad and 'terrified'.

Fearless in the expression of his opinions, he was wont to qualify

praise or blame of great and little with equal nicety. He admired Bach's mass in B minor but did not scruple to say that he found parts of it 'dry'. He admired even more the three first movements of Beethoven's ninth symphony but found in the last bad 'workmanship' (presumably in the range of the vocal writing and proportion)—which is not surprising in a man who thought an act of an opera too long if it exceeded his usual measure by two minutes. But most of these opinions were put forward to illustrate points in a discussion, not as criticisms. This last verdict forms part of a general definition of the difference between Italian and German art, in which by pointing out different tendencies Verdi means to stigmatize Italians who wished to imitate the German masters. 'They will never reach the height of the first three movements of the ninth symphony'—he says—'but will easily assimilate the weaknesses of the last; and shielding themselves under Beethoven's authority they will boast that they have mastered the art of writing music'. He continues: 'We cannot and should not write as the Germans do. . . . But it is stupid and absurd to renounce our own instincts . . . in favour of fashion, or novelty, or mere affectation of knowledge.'

Verdi believed in short that North and South differ in temperament and ideals; that it is well it should be so and that every artist should remain true to his nationality. 'You are happy in being descendants of Bach', he wrote to Bülow. 'We also could once boast of a school that was great and our own . . . which now threatens to fall into ruin.' In all this there is no shadow of prejudice, but courage, honesty, and an insight greater than might be expected from one who in the practice of his art showed himself so unbending. He was not infallible, of course, and it is curious that he should have missed so much in *Carmen* as to prefer Thomas to Bizet. He demanded above all things honesty, in art as well as in private and public life; he detested all that savoured of artificiality and affectation; he held that where there is no natural simplicity there can be no art and deprecated the 'dilettantism' which for a hypothetical originality and for the sake of fashion urged the public to run after what is vague, strange and artificial.

His moderation is all the more remarkable in view of his own sensitiveness and the utter want of proportion in the attacks of those who foolishly believed that by lowering Verdi's prestige they could render a service to the cause of German music. His innate modesty one anecdote he alone will show. To someone who asked him which of his works considered the best he replied: 'My best work is the house for poor musicians that I built in Milan.' It was characteristic of him to decry his own achievements, to deny the worth of the world in which he had his being, and to exalt charity. No wonder Lombroso, who maintained that all genius is a form of degeneracy, could only find in Verdi the exception that proves the rule.

Like most great men he was both an iconoclast and a hero-worshipper—iconoclast in the face of injustice and unfairness; worshipper when satisfied that he was dealing with a hero. He was furious because in 1870 Italy did not intervene on the side of France—the France he had so freely criticized artistically and politically—and like a Paladin contended that to lose with honour would have been more honourable than to stand inactive while a friend suffered. When he sat in Parliament he gave little heed to debates, and he frequently amused himself by writing in musical notation the rise and fall in the voices of the speakers—not an act of contempt nor neglect of duty; but the logical outcome of the conviction that in Parliament one man alone had the right to be arbiter—Cavour.

Some of his sayings err rather on the side of caution and are thus apt to be misunderstood; parsimony of words is praiseworthy, but a miserly use often leads to obscurity. When he said that by going back to the old we should go forward, he certainly did not mean that the way to go forward is to go backwards. It has been seriously suggested that this was his meaning and that he urged the young to return to the simpler ways of the patriarchs, of Palestrina and Marcello. Verdi could not possibly have had in his mind an idea that his own lifework belies; but he could and did urge the importance in musical education of studying the older composers as a preparation for modern composition. The principle, which has long been applied to other studies, was not as general in Italy as Verdi would have had it; we may feel sure that his own early teachers never thought of showing him the application by the old masters of the rules they laid down. They were concerned with grammar and syntax; Verdi, with finer psychological insight and more practical wisdom, urged the didactic value of musical literature. They saw only the theory while he saw its practice. He did not belittle the importance of grammar but he knew that grammar alone could never fire the imagination of the student like a living example. His remark in fact reflects the result of his own experience. The education he had received was inadequate; in the study of the masters, undertaken by himself, he found strength and power. The man who so stoutly believed in the past has survived; many of those who thought of establishing a better claim on the future by spurning past and present have disappeared.

Something may also be said on the apparent inconsistency of an agnostic's writing religious music. Had Verdi any religion, and if he had, what was it founded on?—that is the question which arises when we put side by side the blunt assertions of his wife that he believed nothing, and the evidence of the *Requiem*, the *Stabat Mater*, and the *Te Deum*. The testimony of Peppina Strepponi, however honest, is of little value. Her argument deduced the existence of the Deity from the beauty of the universe, a poetic argument which would appeal to a woman who found

life, on the whole, easy and pleasant. But it could carry no weight with a man who had seen the grimmer aspects of existence.

Moreover, in Italy the Church, claiming temporal power in addition to spiritual ascendancy, became identified with a political movement. Verdi, like the majority of his countrymen, believed that if we are bound to render unto God the things that are God's we must also render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's. In his belief that political unity and spiritual freedom were the need and right of every man he could not accept the claims of churchmen whom political intrigues and ambitions had made less tolerant and more dogmatic. No compromise was possible, and not a few, like Verdi, were completely alienated from the Church who in different circumstances might have been its supporters.

He never interfered with the practice of his wife or of his friends. A letter from Boito to C. Bellaigue[13] is very pertinent upon this point:

'This is the day of the year he loved best. Christmas Eve recalled to him the marvels of childhood.

'Like ourselves, he had early lost the believer's faith, but he nevertheless professed his profound respect for it all his life. He has set an example of Christian faith in the solemn beauty of his religious works, in the observance of its rites (do you remember his fine head bowed in the Chapel of Sant' Agata?), in his noble homage to Manzoni, and in the directions he left for his funeral: one priest, one candle, one cross. . . .

'In every moral and social sense he was a great Christian. But we must be careful not to class him as a Catholic in the political and the theological sense of the word. For nothing would be farther from the truth.'

In other words Verdi was not a churchman. He wrote religious music (an act of worship) out of no fear of future punishment or hope of future reward. His mind revolted from such utilitarian tenets; faced with problems of the universe he said, not boastingly, but in all humility: I do not understand. That attitude is consistent with religion even though it is based on a need of the soul, and not on a moral contract.

So far from being the peasant's, his was the philosopher's outlook, and a philosopher might avoid 'society' for other reasons than those suggested by Verdi's critic. He did not love society any more than did Schumann of whom it is said that once forgetting that he was the host in his own house, he turned desperately to his wife and said: 'Clara, do let us go home, these people make me so weary.'

There are lands where respectability is more sought after than fame, and countries where men would rather be notorious than unknown. Verdi sought neither fame nor respectability, neither notoriety nor obscurity. That he was a man of genius he knew, but he never availed himself of his privileged position to do what would not have been seemly or just in another. He did not despise fame; he despised notoriety as he

[13] A. Lualdi, *Viaggio Musicale in Italia.*

hated success not honourably achieved. Straightforwardness, justice in private and public dealing, were his dominating passions. The rival candidate for Parliament wrote to him after the election professing his conviction that Verdi had no share whatever in the intrigues that had been organized against himself. In answer Verdi wrote: 'The word intrigue does not exist in my dictionary, and I defy the world to show that it does'. He could have repeated that challenge on his deathbed.

It has been remarked that while men respect power and ability, character is as if it had no existence. The thought suggests Sir Thomas Browne, and one is tempted to add the corollary: 'to be found in the register of God, not in the record of man', since character is inconsistent with a mean or shallow mind while power and ability are not.

Verdi had abilities and as much power as falls to the lot of the popular composer. Great as his achievements were, some men have excelled him in sheer facility and others have exercised a deeper influence on the course of musical history. In the qualities that go to the making of character he stood unsurpassed, and if character is but too often overlooked in obscure men, in famous men every aspect is seized upon and scrutinized by a host of students, gossips, and commentators. Few artists stand that scrutiny so well as this man who in his lifetime did his utmost to avoid it.

It would not be impossible to deduce from his music—so rich in humanity—some of the characteristics of the man. A much clearer guide, however, is the *Copialettere*—the collection of letters and documents written by Verdi between 1844 and 1900. The letters were never meant to reach the public. Their very existence was unknown to his closest friend. To him they probably seemed trifling and unimportant—except to himself—and he would have resented their publication, for when Bellini's letters were issued he protested that 'poor little great men' were paying too heavy a price for their popularity if they were to be denied an hour's peace either in life or death![14] To him the record of daily transactions was so important that he never travelled without it. He wanted the written evidence of the past at hand to deal not only fairly but consistently with whatever future occasion might arise. He gave no thought to literary style but took great care that whenever he had to put pen to paper, second thoughts should be allowed to check the first impulse—hence the copy and the frequent corrections in the *Copialettere*, sometimes in his own hand, sometimes in the hand of his wife.

We see Verdi there as he appeared to those with whom he came in contact—to coachman and gardener as well as artist and statesman—a frank and open nature, sometimes a prey to anxieties which could never have worried a less sensitive being; a man who feared to be misunderstood as if anticipating misfortune, as if the law of averages favoured error and the intelligence of other men was never to be wholly trusted.

[14] Letter to Arrivabene.

We see him a kindly tyrant at home, an unmitigated tyrant in the theatre; aroused to anger by self-seeking or attempts to belittle his art. It made his blood boil to hear music drama spoken of as 'amusement'—how can tragedy, whether interpreted by poet or musician, amuse? The only letter that suggests not only displeasure and ill humour but anger, too, is addressed to Mariani who had hinted in a covert way that he would have liked to be amongst the contributors to the Rossini Requiem. He speaks disparagingly of his own work, without ever conveying an impression of mock modesty. In his heart he had an almost superstitious belief in music; there he found truth—and truth to him meant much more than the negative of a lie. In the *Copialettere* the man and his art are revealed all of a piece. Customs, education, national upheavals moulded him, but his nature remained the same.

In a similar way, if his style of composition varied in details and craftsmanship, in essentials it remained unaltered and retained what he most valued, directness and straightforwardness. The chasm between *Nabucco* and *Falstaff* is well bridged over as by a series of arches rising tier on tier like a Roman aqueduct.

When he errs his faults are those of the idealist. Let us not judge the idealist too harshly. The things we most prize and desire—freedom, peace, stability—are not to be hired. And sometimes the ideal becomes good art. The melting sweetness of Verdi's death-scenes has been the object of criticism by those who found it inconsistent with the grim reality. If we agree with Dr. Boas that 'it is the glory of the Shakespearian drama that death assuages, and does not intensify the tragic pain', we must apply the same principle to Verdian opera. Verdi's *Traviata* cannot be compared in dramatic value with Shakespeare's *Macbeth*; but the principle applies equally to both. Only an idealist could have accepted the Mazzinian conception of the function of music in the State. Yet the alliance between art and politics was not wholly detrimental. In response to the thought that exile was the price many of his countrymen had to pay for patriotism, Verdi's music acquires a sweeter and richer eloquence whenever these 'journeymen to grief' appear on the scene.

Few composers show so little variation in the actual substance of their genius during so long a period of development. Baldly presented, the characteristic traits of Verdian art are as evident in the first as in the last opera. His genius, unaided by experience lacked at first disciplined training and a cultivated imagination. In the end he acquired such fineness and penetration that his early admirers failed to understand the continuity—nay, the inevitability of the development. We see it more clearly to-day when his fame stands higher than it ever did and we realize how in that long life he never swerved from the course he had chosen but remained ever true to ideals which may be summed up in two words—simplicity, sincerity.

This book is set in 10-*pt. Plantin, a type-face named after Christopher Plantin, the Antwerp printer who produced the Polyglot Bible, a work outstanding both in scholarship and typography. Plantin is believed to have been designed by Granjon and was extensively used in* 1550 *by Christopher Plantin from whose specimen book it was revived by the Monotype Corporation in* 1913. *The letters of Plantin are more closely linked than in almost any other type making it a popular face for continuous reading.*

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